WAR

Voices, screams, clashing of shields and the dizzying

coming and going of multiplied fly-warriors

By the flow of battle, grasshopper-warriors,

warriors-cars plumed with comet fire,

warriors-luminous reflections torn to pieces in the water;

and wounded their fighting tumbles, their liquid warriors

who come out to oppose their glass shell breasts

against the hunters who dance, after the dance

of the arrows, the dance of the chimeras...

MIGUEL ANGEL ASTURIAS

THE REASONS OF THE GODS

Before running, he stared at the mountain, amazed by those sounds bigger than those of any animal or thing he had ever known. Even more wonderful and strange than the lands they had told him about, where men settled to farm and build homes for the rest of their lives, where children grew to become men in the same place where they would also die. But Tol had never been able to see all this, he could not even imagine what it would be like to see the same tree, a lake of calm waters for longer than the length of a winter. He only knew of the simple life of his people, of the hunts,

ceremonies and rites in which the sorcerer was the representative of the gods.

The wind and the sky had been warning, for several suns ago, with a scent of wet earth and dead animals, while the clouds moved around the mountain. The men had met several times to decide the game. The animals were fleeing to other regions and were becoming scarce in the forests of Droinne.

But the witcher had decided that the time was not yet right.

Tol wondered why. If they had left right away, they would not have given the mountain spirit time to explode. He was disturbed by the idea that they had been deceived.

With the first explosion, the tremors shook the earth and an invisible force began to push the town like a group of ants devastated by an overflowing river. The children cried, covering their ears. The women screamed and ran holding their children by the hands. Goats escaped from the pens appeared from everywhere. The men tried to gather their families and organize their escape, but then they began to run to wherever they could see free of the fiery stones that were piercing the air.

The sky began to be covered with gray and red clouds that enveloped the top of the mountain and the surrounding sky. Then more clouds covered the horizon, and all light disappeared.

Tol observed that phenomenon that was difficult for him to look away from. Fires came out from the top and fell on the slopes and began to descend towards the valley. The forests of oaks and white firs were invaded by lava and the trees were on fire. He only began to move when he realized that fear was beginning to numb his legs, and he felt like he was about to fall. He took a deep breath, and escaped into the crowd. But his dark eyes continued to contemplate the mountain and the valley.

The heat took away his strength. He brushed his limp hair from his face and rubbed his beard and sniffed at the sweat that soaked it. The ash filled his mouth and throat again even though he spit so many times that there was no saliva left, only a crust of ash making it difficult for him to breathe.

He saw his wife, who ran up to him to hug her chest. There was a desperate fear in his eyes, he looked everywhere as if he had lost something. Then she quickly turned away from him and was lost in the crowd again. When he was able to find her again, she was still searching for something from her, but now she was also trying to talk to him amidst the screams and the ethunder from the mountain, from the rocks that crossed the air.

-The children! -She told him.

They changed course until they almost made a semicircle. Tol could see the group of children stumbling as they fled from him. The women were barely able to calm them down. The little ones screamed, while the older ones pointed towards the mountain. Some had stayed still, hugging their dogs and crying.

At an age even younger than his children, he had been part of those groups led by women. When the children grew old enough to learn to hunt, they were taken from the village to die alone. But his mother had died before that, and when he asked his father Zor the cause, the old man's face always darkened with an angry expression.

Tol looked for his children among the others and carried them on his shoulders, his wife following a few steps away. He began to run with the certainty that they were going to be saved. He felt strong enough to drag his family as far as necessary.

I am a good hunter, I must think that I am after some prey, if I do not want fatigue to stop me.

But he had begun to drown even though he knew it was a long distance away from danger. The ash fell in the form of a thick, incessant rain.

I have walked much more on other occasions, carrying twice the weight I carry now.

He thought of his father as he moved forward, that always gave him strength. All his life he had sought to accompany him, to learn from him, because he had been perhaps the greatest hunter in his town. He couldn't tell how many days and nights they walked together, nor the sunsets they witnessed in those old days. Life consisted of changing lands permanently, and the seasons and places became confused in his memory.

Rivers mighty or slow like herds of bison, lush or open forests, with reddish trees, dark green trees, beech or fir trees, peach trees whose fruits quenched my thirst on summer afternoons. Roe deer and foxes, badgers and otters in the streams, beavers building their flimsy bridges. All of that is a single memory of colors and confused things, a single symbol of life with my father.

The old man had begun to weaken for a long time. He was sick, and he had to realize that very soon the day of his death would come. He remembered that once, when Tol was very little, he had seen him approach the group. He hardly knew his father, he always went far away, to the forests, to hunt. That day he carried a bone dagger tied to the goat blanket that served as his shelter, his head covered with an otter skin cap. His strong face, rigid in his expression in front of women, softened when he saw his son. After pushing his way through them, he lifted Tol up to sit on his shoulders. From up there, Tol felt bigger than the other children, eager to shout to everyone that he was the son of the tallest man in the village. Then

he took off his father's fur cap and rested her head on his hair, clasping her hands under his chin, stroking his beard. And as they walked, he felt Zor's bare feet, echoing across the earth like two invincible masses on the surface of the world. A march that not even the old trees themselves would have dared to interrupt.

The sky had darkened even more. The heat hindered his steps, his legs were weak and made him stumble on the rocks. He could barely keep his eyes open for a while, the ash and sweat hurting them. He saw women around him with children in their arms, crying as they ran. They looked at the mountain from time to time, and did not seem to understand so many strange noises, so many screams and moans. The world was dying, and the sound came from the mountain god's huge mouth.

Next to some trees he saw his father. He took down one of the children and gave it to his wife. She continued and Tol approached the old man. His father was injured and his face was covered in ash and he was breathing hard. He put skins on the wounds on his body and carried him on his back, while he held his other son by the hand. He started walking. The ground gained in his race was now lost in a slow walk, but the fact of having found his father had given him confidence.

People scattered in all directions, until they were out of sight. Men he thought he recognized were dying lying in the mud, some extended their hands to him as they saw him pass. Others passed by him and grabbed his arm, but he let go of them.

Tol began to feel better, despite his fatigue. The burden had forced him to calm down, and his rhythmic pace had brought him into a sleepy state of mind. He sensed that somewhere was the point where they were finally going to be out of reach of the mountain.

The air had become too thin to see very far. The stones did not stopfrom falling. Her and the child's backs were hurt. Her father's body, on the other hand, no longer irritated her skin. He had the thought, the curious idea that they were one body.

A dog accompanied his son with the slow pace of a broken leg, occasionally stopping to lick the sores on his thigh. Suddenly he saw the animal sniff the air and raise its ears. The dog started running without waiting for them. They too then heard the crystalline sound, the bubbling of water materializing in their ears.

When they reached the river, Tol sat down to rest on the bank, while the boy and the dog quenched their thirst. A man's hand touched her arm.

-Come on! We are building rafts and we need help.

He was getting dark. The fire at the mouth of the volcano continued to come out in the form of long colored tongues. A layer of reddish, smoking

lava covered the summit, ran down the slopes and washed away the trees of the forest in which he had been hunting a few days before.

Tol helped carry branches and tie them together with ropes. The knots he had learned as a child would save his life.

So, son, one turn with the finger slightly bent, with the other hand you have to turn the rope, one part over the other, and then again, and two more times. Father taught me this knot on rainy nights when we couldn't sleep.

The rafts were finished and thrown into the water, securing them with ropes to prevent them from being dragged by the current. Some began to climb, and Tol ran in search of his family. He made the boy board first, but when he was carrying his father in his arms, one of the men stopped him.

"No!" he told her.

He had feared that this refusal would come at any moment. The growing resentment of the people towards them had finally materialized in this gesture of contempt. But he was not willing to be rejected.

He pushed the other, the man got in his way again. He advanced forcefully once again, but he was unable to defend himself without his hands free. He was hit, and fell to the ground with his father on top of him. He tasted blood in his mouth, the smell of the other's fist dirtying his lips.

Before he could get up, the rafts had already moved away. He tried to catch up with them, but the men rowed quickly. He heard the voices of those fleeing, saying what he did not need to hear again: Zor must have abandoned the village.

-We are not going to continue dragging him!- they shouted.

Sometime, perhaps very soon, I will go to the land that is inherited with death. It is necessary, a solitary job, but it is not yet time, my father said so many times.

From the beach, he watched them as they walked away. At least his son was safe. The dog also watched the running water and the rafts. Maybe he would miss Zaid as much as he was going to.

He looked at the old man next to him, who was mumbling meaninglessly and groaning in pain.

The night was dark, illuminated only by the flashes of the volcano. He built a smaller raft and they climbed onto it, propelling themselves with a branch. They moved forward, guided by the reflection of the torches on the shore and the other rafts. Several men who were swimming tried to get on,

but he chased them away. He watched them sink into the water that gave off a bright, incandescent reflection.

The most important thing is my father, although he is the only thing that prevents me from saving myself as well. I feel good with the old man, better than with anyone else.

The raft made landfall on the opposite coast. They walked a short distance between bonfires and women caring for their wounded men. Behind a cliff, perhaps a rock wall with narrow caves that he could not yet make out, Tol laid his father down and wrapped him in furs. He began to doze, but a growing noise of distant voices startled him. The surface of the river was shifting, and the same incandescence now grew toward them. The sky lit up with multiple brief flashes like lightning. The mountain itself seemed to advance in the form of a golden and red mass. Shadows of arms and legs became clearer in the light of the flames, they grew like animals surrounded by a reddish halo, making gestures of supplication towards the dark sky. The roar of the devastated trees, of the branches and the burning and smoking foliage, pursued them. The men and women threw themselves into the river, and the smell of burning skin emerged from the bodies. Then the river began to rise.

Tol barely had time to pick up his father and flee towards the high rocks. He heard the waves sweeping across the beach and knocking down the trees in the first forested furrow. He knelt to breathe for a moment, and looked back. When he saw the river rise again, he would lift Zor up and continue ascending. From the rocks of the promontory he saw the scant light of dawn, and he dropped down next to a dead log. From a distance you could hear the murmur of those who had followed the witcher, in an even higher sector, where they could seethe torches shining among the trees. But he was too tired to think about what he was going to do next.

The night and the cold had attenuated the heat of the flames, and Tol was able to sleep. In the morning, the drizzle of water and ash continued to fall on the bodies. The column of smoke continued to rise from the mountain.

Tol looked at his father. The forehead and the lines of pain had relaxed.

The survivors occupied the entire extension of the reedbed between the promontory and the beginning of the forest. Some ate around the bonfires, others healed their sick. A group walked towards where the rest of the town had taken cover with the witcher. The dead had not yet been collected.

Tol knew that it was necessary to take his father there too, but he wanted to wait until the road was clear, he feared that they would arrest him if they recognized him. Then he carried Zor on his back, and followed the others through a path of fallen trees. The new course of the river could

be seen beyond, running between earth colors and small yellow whirlwinds that made corpses emerge from the bottom.

Seeing Reynod on the beach, Tol separated from the rest.

The witcher walked surrounded by the assistants who protected him, making his way with difficulty among the wounded lying on the sand. The gray-haired head seemed to move according to the gesture of the hand that was checking the bodies. A wooden horn covered in feathers was tied to his wrist.

Tol had come to a stop behind the assistants. When the witcher recognized old Zor on his son's shoulders, he interrupted his work and went to them. Then he began to speak very loudly, with an accusing arm raised toward Zor. Many turned away from his face in fear.

-That man doesn't belong here! He has disobeyed the law and dishonored his family!

Tol had never managed to get his father to tell him the cause of the witcher's anger. Not even when that fury had caused the entire family to suffer as well. They were kept at a distance in the caravans, but they were nevertheless watched with strict rigidity. Once, when Tol was very young and newly married, he wanted to build a hut to protect his family from the intense sun of a particularly hot time.

-What are you doing?-Reynod asked him, surrounded by his entourage in the usual hunter recruitment round.- Are you going to stay here for a long time? You follow us or abandon us, but don't expect my protection anymore.

The others looked at him with hatred. He had to put aside the branches and tools, and he lowered his eyes in obedience. The witcher walked away with that peculiar look of simultaneous fury and shame that he never knew how to understand.

When you talk to Reynod, you're always wrong, my father said. He becomes another every time one wishes to penetrate his eyes, to see the process of his mind. He preempts any innocent glance that lasts longer than necessary, closing any gap between the eyelids capable of revealing his thoughts. He transforms into another, of impenetrable hardness.

The witcher's voice distracted him from the memory.

-Because of men like Zor the spirit of the mountain has become angry and punishes us all. Now I must find out if the gods want me to sacrifice my daughters. If I have to do it, you will no longer be saved from the stake, nor will your family.

Then he turned his back on them, and the others approached again, surrounding him with pleading voices. Tol stood there, looking at his father, who was awake and had heard everything. The dirty skins had stuck to the

sores, and with every movement he gave a suppressed scream. He carried him back to the promontory to get him away from the eyes of the others. He was hungry and he decided to go hunting.

The path leading to the forest was occupied by children and women resting or looking for others. He passed between them, looking carefully in case he found his children. Later, the people began to disperse, until the entire forest seemed to be emptied of wails and screams. He didn't hear a single bird. Green sap flowed from the bark of the trees. He remembered the day he left his mark, for the first time, on the trunk of a fir tree. The day of his initiation.

Zor had taken him to choose his spear in the armorer's hut. Tol felt almost like a man, and ignored the looks of the craftsman's son, with whom he had played until then. He began to observe, with his eyes attentive and serious, with his hands behind his back and his steps slow, the wooden weapons scattered on the ground. The ends of bones that the old man used as points, molding them and sharpening them. Then, like a connoisseur, he took them in his hands to get into a combat position.

The craftsman's family had stopped looking at him. But Tol listened, while he pretended to be attentive to his choice, to the conversation of the men. asked the gunsmith.

Zor didn't like to talk much, and he answered with reluctance.

-Yes, behind the lagoon, it will be easier for Tol.

-They say they saw some strangers passing by, riding horses that I never saw in the East. They wore curious clothes and helmets with horns. It seems that they got off some boats on the north coast, with weapons more brilliant than stones or bone. They looked tired, they say, and slept until dawn. Afterwards, they left no traces.

"So what?" Zor asked him, seriously, forced to talk more than he wanted. "I have seen them too, very early in the morning after spending the night in the forests." They had told me that they were like apparitions, but rather they are how we imagine the gods, with light skin and hair like the sun. I've thought about them a lot since then.

Head down, he continued speaking while looking at his son.

- But I think they are just men, and they don't bother us. When the Witcher decides to let other peoples teach us something, we will know them. For now, we are only hunters and subjects of Reynod.

Tol knew that since the death of his mother, Zor's temper had become almost intolerable. They had had the opportunity to get away long before, but he had insisted on staying in that town that hated him. As if he did not

want to leave the body of his wife, whom he believed he saw moving among people with the same beauty as when she was alive.

Life with his father had been isolated and lonely. They erected fences around the huts they built when the migration stopped for a time. Fences no taller than a man's height, for Reynod did not wish to lose sight of them. The hunters were always watching them, ready to punish Zor if they did not follow them into lands that were increasingly poor. Many times Tol had heard his father lament loudly each morning, wondering when Reynod would stop. But outside the limits of his hands, as if he were fed up and indifferent to what the sorcerer might think or do, those events began to fade from his concerns.

Every five winters the fence was abandoned, the town changed forests and the huts were raised again. They had never gotten food or help from the people. Only some rebels came to visit him. The craftsman and weapon builder went to see him with the excuse of returning the spear that he had taken to repair, and he sat next to the boy and his father, on the piled logs of the fence, contemplating the sunset. . The bonfires in the fields were extinguished, and the columns of smoke rose. The singing of the owls began in the middle of the night. Then the craftsman left and they were alone.

Zor's gaze then acquired an almost palpable wateriness, as if he had submerged his face under the current of a calm river. It was a look with drooping eyelids, a trimmed beard over a mouth with slightly open, expectant lips. Tol was afraid to look at him at those moments, because it wasn't the father he saw, at least not the one he had always known. It was at that time that he realized that Zor was defeated. No matter how much he returned to hunting every day, even if when he returned from the forest he lifted him on his shoulders, it was all over.

The day after the meeting with the craftsman, they set out on the road to the forest, and stopped in a clearing. Tol felt trapped within that barrier of enormous beech trees, silent divine figures of impenetrable thought.

Zor was tall at the time, his beard grew very close to his eyes, and thick hair covered his body and legs. Sometimes Tol liked to think of his father as a huge, slow-walking animal, strong and quiet.

They walked along a narrow path, where the sun's rays illuminated the dust and seeds that rotated in the breeze and fell into the leaf litter. Little Tol, while his eyes were lost in the tangle of the high branches, thought about the stories that his father had told him on many occasions about the bison hunts when he was very young. He then imagined himself accompanying him on those days, leaving the forest with his father like another hunter, towards the plains where the great beasts grazed.

A fallow deer crossed the path quickly and stopped at a stream. They approached quietly, hiding behind the trunks, the sound of their steps hidden by the sound of the water.

Tol threw the spear without waiting for his father's order. Immediately he sensed that something was wrong. Zor's face looked angry. The animal had fallen on its side, the spear was stuck in one of its haunches, and blood was gushing out from a red spot, flooding the grass around it. Zor began to curse with words that the boy had never heard before, and went in search of the deer, crushing the bushes with furious steps.

-No!-He shouted when Tol also wanted to get closer. OfPoi tirò fuori la lancia e la conficcò di nuovo dietro l'animale, più volte. Le urla riempirono la foresta. Gli uccelli fuggirono in stormi dagli alberi. Quindi Zor sollevò la bestia sulle sue spalle e la portò dove si trovava suo figlio.

Tol attese l'approvazione tanto desiderata, ma non ottenne nulla. Da dove si trovava, vide due cuccioli insanguinati e immobili sulla riva del ruscello. L'acqua ha cercato di trascinarli via.

-Non potevamo lasciarli soli- fu l'unica cosa che gli disse suo padre al suo ritorno, e Tol apprese quel pomeriggio che a volte la misericordia lo costringeva anche a uccidere.

"La morte che offri", gli disse più tardi suo padre, "deve essere sempre certa e definitiva".

Tol scavò nelle tane e cacciò due talpe e un coniglio, trovò quaglie morte. Per ora il cibo era sufficiente per il padre malato. Uscendo dal campo aperto si ritrovò di fronte al paesaggio dei feriti adagiati contro i tronchi, sotto la debole e incessante pioggia di cenere.

Era già notte quando finirono di mangiare, ma la soddisfazione tardava ad arrivare. I pezzi di carne avevano la barba sporca di Zor. Tol cercò di pulirsi le labbra ferite. Il vecchio era uscito dal suo letargo e chiacchierarono a lungo accanto al fuoco. Poi suo padre cominciò a fissarlo. Qualcosa nei suoi occhi lottava per essere raccontato.

-Sacrificheranno le giovani donne, figliolo. Per colpa mia la montagna si è arrabbiata con la gente.

"Gli Dei sono arrabbiati per tutti noi", rispose Tol, perché non capiva perché suo padre credesse di nuovo negli dei a cui aveva rinunciato.

-Devo prendere molte vite per calmare la loro rabbia, questa sarà la mia offerta.

-Ma padre, che dei, se non ti avessi mai sentito pregare.

-Deve esserci, vero? Guarda il vulcano, figliolo, la montagna mi ha convinto della mia colpa più di tutti questi anni di iniquità.

Tol cercò di convincerlo del contrario, ma il vecchio lo guardò con un'espressione di cruda, irrimediabile certezza. Sembrava disposto a farlo come poteva, anche senza aiuto.

-Ho bisogno che la maga prepari qualcosa per me. Non penso che tu debba spiegargli niente.

Si rassegnò ad obbedire e si allontanò guidato dalla luce dei fuochi, dal rumore del fiume, dal vento forte e debole, dall'odore di carne cruda e bruciata che si perdeva in lontananza. L'aroma della terra bagnata cresceva.

Poi percepì lo strano, antico odore della maga. Si diceva che la vecchia fosse capace di sopravvivere a qualsiasi calamità, uno spirito che prendeva forma ogni volta che qualcuno aveva bisogno di lei. La trovò circondata da donne che pregavano per i loro figli feriti. Il fuoco illuminava le mani della vecchia, agili come se avessero dei fili proiettati dal soffitto buio della notte. Un fumo diverso, dai toni grigi e ocra, si alzava dalle fiamme e dal fiume con un odore di spezie, forse di noci, ma all'improvviso si mutò in un altro odore di carne o di cuoio bruciato. Quell'aroma cominciò a inebriarlo, ebbe le vertigini e dovette socchiudere le palpebre per distinguere le donne che aveva davanti.

Quando si avvicinò, si allontanarono. La maga alzò lo sguardo.

"Ti aspetto da molto tempo", lo rimproverò.

Da bambino accompagnava spesso la madre dalla vecchia in cerca di guarigione o di consiglio. Una paura indicibile lo faceva tremare in quelle occasioni, al solo vedere quel volto nell'ombra della capanna, e pregava soltanto che lei non se ne accorgesse o non si accorgesse di lui. Superando quella paura che credeva morta, cominciò a spiegare.

-Mio padre...

Ma la vecchia lo interruppe.

-La bevanda è pronta- E si perdeva nell'oscurità intorno al fuoco. Tornò poco dopo con un contenitore tra le mani. Lo appoggiò tra i palmi di Tol e lo avvertì dei suoi effetti. Le donne seguirono tutto ciò con espressione di estrema reverenza. Tol guardò all'interno del recipiente, un liquido senza alcun odore o aspetto strano ondeggiava con i movimenti delle sue mani.

«Tuo padre ti sta aspettando!» gli ricordò all'improvviso.

Tornò indietro con la fontana che abbracciava il suo corpo, proteggendolo come se la vita di suo padre fosse rinchiusa lì. Un bambino che trasportava il liquido che la più innocente goffaggine avrebbe fatto versare.

Vedendolo tornare, Zor cercò di alzarsi e allungare le braccia per chiedere la miscela. I suoi occhi erano torbidi e rossi.

-La vecchia disse di berlo lentamente.

Zor annuì, ma bevve a lunghi sorsi tremanti, senza sprecare una sola goccia. Lasciò il recipiente vuoto sul pavimento e si preparò a dormire.

Tol non aveva ancora sonno. Cominciò a pulire la punta della lancia sul fuoco, finché il crepitio delle fiamme lentamente si spense.

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Il sole illuminava appena una parte dell'orizzonte, coperto di nuvole grigie.

Pochi si erano svegliati. Tra i corpi addormentati aleggiava ancora qualche fuoco da bivacco. La corrente scorreva velocemente attraverso il nuovo canalerte of the body belonged to him or the old man. They were a man and a boy again, but swapped. The young man carrying the old man as before the old man had carried the other in his arms. The sun was setting on an indefinite horizon, too perfect to be real. That's not what evenings are like, he thought, something's up. And he continued with his chest restless and his shoulders molded to the flimsy body he carried, soft as a bag of feathers.

Two men emerged from the foliage, from the shadowy branches that hid the hunters. Each tree was an enemy with the dark face of the moonless night, a blind night as if it had a blindfold over its eyes of air. They attacked them and stuck spears into the old man's body. But no matter how much force he used, or the screams and pleas and blows with which he defended himself, he could do nothing to prevent his father from being taken away from him. The old man's body was an almost liquid mass, a frayed cloth wet with blood.

And he, who had remained still after the fight, sitting like a useless person in front of the domain of the world, watched the fireballs fall from the sky.

"I had a sad dream," Tol said the next morning.

The old man looked at him.

"The forest fire?" he asked.

Tol nodded.

-They are the gods who want to scare us. Do not think about that.

It was still early to leave. The wind had picked up and you could hear the movement of the leaves, the screeching of birds over the murmur of the stream. Shortly after, dawn found them on the road again.

In some places the vegetation was thick and it was difficult for them to penetrate it. Where the stream formed a clearing, the deer had taken refuge with their fawns. They also sacrificed them, but the animals had not tried to flee, they only raised their heads a little, enough to look at them.

"If it's not us, it will be the scavengers," said Zor, while he cleaned his spear.

Tol listened to him as he did when he was a child, revering his words. But towards sunset they found nothing but burned bodies, and a heavy silence, as if the sky were about to fall on them. A smell of rain came from the east, still far away, beyond the top of the volcano.

-Will we save the virgins in time?- Tol asked.

-It all depends on how many victims the gods want.

-And who knows?

-I don't think anyone, that's why I have to continue until he dies.

Tol paused for a moment, while his father continued in front of him. He looked at the bodies scattered on the creeping ivy, or floating in the river waters. He figured that if these beasts were not the victims, the town's virgins would be. That's why he decided to continue, despite the fatigue and the slaughter, because he went against everything Zor had taught him.

He took off the furs that covered him. His hirsute body, like that of a hunched animal, blended into the dim light of the misty noon.

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Two nights passed, and Tol remembered, as if the old sorceress were there, the words she had said to him.

The slower you drink, the longer it will last.

His father had taken it in long sips, and the effect still continued. But how much more, was what he needed to know. On the way, as the old man walked forward, Tol knelt for a moment to pray to the gods.

Suddenly I am afraid of the weather, that the days of hunting will not be enough to conform to the spirit of the mountain. The days cannot be caught or stopped, the animals will eventually become exhausted. Then it will be

necessary to look for another forest, and more brew, and more time to satisfy a divine desire that no one will be able to fulfill. This is my fear, but my father does not seem to think, he advances in the hunger of victims of him. Maybe he no longer cares whether you exist or not. If they are there, they will do something to save them. If not, it makes no difference to die in the forest or at the stake. The bodies end up being dirt and burnt flesh.

He heard a crash of branches and a scream. Zor had once again tried to throw the spear from him and had fallen face first into the ground. Tol ran to help him, but the old man got up alone. His forehead was bleeding, and he began to walk slowly. His bones had weakened again. His legs were giving out again, his face had become covered in brown spots again. He stooped a little more with each step.

"Father," Tol began to say, but the sound and aroma of the fire interrupted him.

The sky was once again inhabited by smoke and darkness. The flames did not come from the volcano this time, but from this side of the river.

They caught us, Reynod's hunters caught us.

The fire was advancing rapidly. Branches broke and fell around them. Tol helped the old man up and walk, but Zor's legs could no longer support him, and he had to carry him on his back once more.

He looked everywhere, and had no choice but to remain standing among the trees licked by the tongues of fire. The smell of almendros had invaded the entire forest, and lulled them to sleep, raising Tol's memory above the fire until he took him to his childhood.

The smoke made him cry like a child.

The old man's gaze had an expression of regret and renunciation. Among the crackling of the branches, Zor said he now heard the screams of the sacrificial virgins.

"They are the ones who scream, son, we couldn't save them," he said weakly. "The cry of virgins cannot be confused with any other scream."

-The gods are coming to look for us, father.

This time the old man did not answer him. Tol carried him, looking for a clear path through the fire. Zor's body became light, so ethereal and soft, that it was as if his soul were leaving him with an imperceptible, crestfallen march towards the top. This is what I had heard the sorcerer say once, the weight of the soul is greater than the weight of the body.

Then he laid him down on a narrow patch of dry land. He sat next to him, put his hands on his father's chest to feel him breathe, and began to look at him with pity. He had aged much more than the age he actually was.

"I suffer," the old man murmured, in a very low voice, with a moan more similar to the sound of a dead person than to crying.

That voice seemed to come from somewhere else, so Tol looked up, at the skeletons of the trees moved by something different from fire or wind, a kind of incandescent mist. His father's eyes were still open, but they were nothing more than the rigid expression of the sores on his body.

Then the hunters appeared. First he heard the rumble of their footsteps on the scorched earth. Then he saw the bodies advancing among the branches, the fierce faces painted red and yellow, the colors of war on the faces of the children of the sun.

Tol didn't know what to do at first, however the memory of him was nearby, in his confused but memorable mind. The day of his initiation in the forest came crisp and clear, like a revelation stronger than all the rest of his beliefs and fear he had been taught.

The pious image, the beautiful figure of his father freeing his children from suffering, was the only thing that had given concrete meaning to his childhood, something that he remembered without hesitation or fear. Something he could recount step by step as if it had happened only a few days before. The act that Zor had performed, the gesture of mercy and the caress of death that he had offered to those animals, would be exactly the same as the act that Tol was willing to perform. So he raised what was left of the edge of his broken spear, and plunged it into the body of his father.

Flocks of storks took flight from the beach. One group after another crossed the river, until they merged into the gray horizon like their feathers.

Zaid called his father, who had stayed on the shore with his grandfather. The dog did not leave them, and waving its tail, it circled around the edge of the water, watching the child go away with a melancholy look.

Behind them, the tall shadow of the volcano continued to threaten them.

Many times he had wondered what things or beings lived deep in the earth, and that now came out like fire through the mouth of the mountain. No matter how much he watched his father or anyone else dig for days and days, no one had ever reached the end.

The dead are there, his grandfather had once told him. They are the land we walk on. They sustain us.

But further down, he wanted to know. The old man did not respond again. His face was a mask as dark and hard as the same mud that covered the dead he spoke of.

-Father!- Zaid shouted with his arms raised, jumping on the flimsy frame of the raft.

"Stay down, or I'll throw you into the water!" someone threatened him from the group of unrecognizable faces around him.

A mass of ash, mud and water formed on the surface of the raft. Zaid sat in a narrow space between the others' backs and feet. Every movement began to seem uncomfortable to him, rubbing his body reddened by insects, even the simple need to urinate caused his skin to burn, and his hands trembled from the cold.

Then he cried as he thought of his family and his dog, whom he might never see again. That cry of his was like that of women. The proximity of the

bodies and the fatal smell, the aroma of death that grew around them, excited him. He was almost thirteen winters old, tall and very thin. He liked to think of himself as a green but unbreakable stalk when the memory of his father's strong body came to mind.

When Tol went hunting, he and his mother followed him to the path that led to the forest. Zaid was still too young to accompany him. Very early, before dawn, the two would get up and walk alongside Tol, regretting seeing him leave alone, with his spear on his shoulder and his step slow. , slightly inclined to one side. The sun was just beginning to peek behind the path of conifers, while the screeching of the robins and the breeze with new sounds, fresh as the morning dew, escorted it. Sometimes he had dreamed that he was going with him, seeing himself from the door of the hut. As if he were another child, in another time and circumstance, observing with admiration his own back, strong and wide like his father's.

"When you're as big as this," Tol told him one day, pointing to his own chest, "you'll come hunt with me."

And the next afternoon they went to see the spear maker, who had learned the trade from his father and his grandfather, whom everyone in their time respected as great craftsmen. The man began to tell them about his last trip. He had found strange materials resistant to the use and blows of weapons.

-Bone and stone break easily, but the spears I have seen penetrate flesh as if it were water! - Then he lamented with words that they did not understand, perhaps learned in the lands he had visited, and he looked away. to hide the transparency of her shiny eyes. The call of his youngest children could be heard, clear and demanding, from inside the hut. It was morning, and the woman's cooing suddenly arose to calm them.

She went on to say that when the witcher found out about his discovery, he sent his men to take away his new weapons.

-They grabbed my arms, and used my own tools to intimidate me. My family looked at me. My father, the poor old man, was crying. Tears formed furrows under his eyes. They could well have been the last of his life! I was afraid for him, and I then told them where I had kept the weapons. They went to look for them in the cave. The witcher stayed watching me while we waited in the hut. But his eyes were pale as air. I did not lower my head before him. When we heard the sound of weapons, he came out and ordered them to be buried in a place he would choose later. Afterwards he threatened to burn me alive if he insisted on my rebellion.

The craftsman's face had become both sad and disappointed when he finished his story. His hands were kept busy with the continuous polishing of his tools. Then he put all his effort and all his anger into the silence that

followed. The dust fell and he covered his feet with the dust. Some splinters and bark jumped in the morning light.

Zaid continued playing with the dog, throwing small wooden blocks for him to fetch. The men's words came to him clearly.

-I remember other times, Tol, when your father used the same weapons as you do now. We haven't learned anything, my friend. Out there, beyond the sea to the north, or the mountains to the south, or the River Droinne, there are other things that would amaze you. Men build villages and farm. The weather there is cold or hot, but they never lack food. Children are raised next to the animals that give them milk, and they do not need to go hunting to feed themselves. They work the land...

Zaid suddenly felt embarrassed. What he heard attracted him, but it represented a clear disobedience to the power of the sorcerer. He tried to distract himself with the sight of maces and other weapons piled up in a dark corner of the cabin. The craftsman began to look at him distrustfully, then fixing his eyes on Tol, who gestured that he should not worry.

"My son and I know how to keep secrets," he told her.

But Zaid had been confused by this challenge to Reynod's authority.

His eyes watched the river with concern. The surface was thickening in some places. The men's backs swayed to the rhythm of the water, and he felt dizzy. He closed his eyelids, and when he opened them he found the women's dirty, warm breasts, and this disturbed him even more.

The other shore remained lost in the mist. Perhaps the current was dragging them out into the widest part, or the river had overflowed its banks. Some said it was necessary to get away from the mountain and go down the river. Others, who would surely be left stranded. But the rest continued rowing, and he saw how their hands hurt on the splintered wood.

The river was covered in ash. The corpses impeded progress, and they pushed them with the oars. The skin of the dead came off when touched. Then they sank slowly and the waters bubbled around them.

The women on the raft looked at each other, continuing to breastfeed the children. Zaid thought of his mother. The last time he had seen her, the four of them were fleeing through the crowd. Until they found the grandfather.

Why did my father abandon us for grandfather?

He resented old Zor for the curse he had brought upon them, although the only thing he knew for sure was that the witcher had exiled him from the village long before. And the old man was, From what Zaid had ever seen,

nothing more than a weak figure that a puny wind could blow down. The children ran away from Zaid when they saw him, or shouted insulting phrases at him when they found him on the roads. Grandpa's name was mixed with anger and contempt.

He heard someone calling him.

-Zor's grandson.

The voice came from the pile of faces, but it seemed to him for a moment that it also came from the water and the drowned, or from the abandoned shore, from the red sky full of spirits. Then the man whose voice he had heard made space among the others and placed a hand on Zaid's shoulder.

"Don't be afraid," he told him, and offered him a blanket. His way of speaking was common, but there was a strange tone, feigned perhaps.

Zaid couldn't think much about it, however. He suddenly felt his body relax. The hair on his skin had stood up in a shiver as she felt the sting of the fabric on his irritated skin. He lay down and closed his eyes. It was no longer important who was next to him, nor whether the boat was going to sink or stall, even the sky could collapse by order of the gods. He just wanted to sleep, and when he did, it was like finding himself in his father's arms once again.

The Witcher has arrived with the pain.

Circumcision and pain.

His face is neither eyes nor mouth. It is sorrow, affliction.

He is in the clearing to which they have taken him, and the ceremony begins.

"Don't hurt my beard, son!" His father tells him.

He wants to cry. He feels the rough solidity of Tol's beard in his hands.

The moment of peace before the storm, the lividity before the pain. Then the Witcher appears with his face painted with black stripes, making ritual gestures with dark meaning with his arms. He dances to the rhythm of music that the helpers play in the forest, and that Reynod seems to direct from afar, through the foliage, the lights of the fireflies, the gloomy yawns of the owls and that impenetrable mist of fog and dew that settles after nightfall on the dark green blanket.

Tum... tum... tum!

The drums are voices that hurt. He now knows it definitively: the pain comes from the darkness, it comes with the essential music that gives it a form, searching for a body, a warm place, a mind willing to accommodate it. Because that, the strange, the unknown, the fearful, also needs shelter.

The Witcher slowly takes off his tunic. Zaid and his father are also naked. Then the ceremony begins its end with the pain of the cut. The loss, the step that cannot be stopped or taken back. The only day in the world from which you cannot return.

Tum...tum...tum!

Mouth closed, no need to shout, no need to be ashamed. The softness of tears must be forgotten.

From the middle of that night surrounded by bonfires in honor of his dead childhood, from the warmth of his father's arms and chest, he wakes up with a start, screaming.

The same thing always happened to him, even in his bed and surrounded by his family. But this time he woke up under a red sun. He returned to lucidity among strangers, bloated, contracted faces. There were fewer than before. Perhaps some had fallen into the river while he was sleeping, others had perhaps tried to reach the shore. There were remains of food in the empty places.

The man who had spoken to him was arguing with another older man, with a beard and long, white hair. The old man's eyes were clear, his skin was red and he looked angry. Zaid did not understand the dialect in which they spoke. The old man then looked at him over the other's shoulder.

"Zor the Traitor's grandson has woken up!" the youngest said as he turned around. He was smiling, but Zaid backed away. The other did not pay attention to him and approached him very quickly to cover him again, as if he had discovered something in the child's body.

"It happens to all of us," he murmured in his ear, and pointed to the lump under Zaid's blanket.

He hadn't realized it had happened to him again when he woke up. He had sex so rigid that sometimes he felt sick. He looked at the other. The man's smile was unpleasant. The old man's white face, with traces of an ancient magnificence, was serene, worried at the same time, like an incarnate god watching over them.

And beyond, the gray sky had been filled with red flashes.

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As night fell on the fifth day, there was only one woman left on board. Zaid heard, above the opaque sound of the thick water, her cry of regret sunk in the silence of the torches and the rafts that accompanied them. He saw the movement and heard the moaning of the men for most of the night in the shadow of the woman lying with her legs spread.

When dawn broke, she was no longer moving. The smell of blood emanated from the whiteness of her thighs. She had one arm swinging over the surface of the water. Some faint cries came from the hidden coast in the bruma, the scream of the hawks flew over the river.

The men got up and threw the woman's body away. The dull splash of the troubled waters quickly died away. There were five men left besides the old man and the boy. But the two of them survived, perhaps, by the grace of the others, because that was what he thought when he saw the bundles covered by the cloth that wrapped the babies.

The man spoke to him.

-Where is your grandfather?

-He stayed with my father on the beach.

-I knew him, a long time ago. He and my father hunted together many times. But your grandfather betrayed him one day by leaving him abandoned in the forest, in front of the beast that tore off his foot.

A new explosion was heard from the volcano. Flocks of birds took flight from the trees and screams mingled with the voices of men praying. The man looked towards the shore for a moment, and then continued speaking.

-Old Zor disobeyed the Law. He passed his age and wanted to stay among the people. He takes his food from the children...

"My grandfather still hunts his own food," Zaid told him.

-But those preys should be ours. He disgraced your family. Your father may have been the most respected for his skill, and now everyone rejects him. Zor's grandchildren must be our slaves. This is what the Grand Warlock ordered.

Perhaps his parents, Zaid thought, by staying apart, had spared him and his brother the sufferings of that mandate. But there seemed to be no excuse for more tolerance. As if the mountain had ordered Zor's family to be punished by exploding.

The old man was listening. He had long hair covering half of his face, and the dust formed a thick layer on his shoulders. He was now drinking a

sip of water from a vessel that he then hid under his legs. Zaid didn't understand why the others didn't ask for it.

At night, the men opened the bags. They unwrapped them neatly, as if they were careful not to break the contents. The flies came out through the opening, and Zaid could see the corpses shrunken by the heat, giving off the smell of blood, salt, and burnt hair. The men cut them with knives and distributed them among themselves.

He was going to be next, he told himself.

But the volcano spoke again. What was left of the summit had split in two and rocks were falling down the slopes. The shouts of the people revived again and the footsteps grew towards the river. People began to appear on the beach from the burning forest. Those who reached the shore tried to swim towards the rafts. But those who rowed repulsed them with their oars. The current carried them away.

Zaid then saw that death was a presence capable of being palpable, that he could even have made a gesture to call her, like a domesticated animal. It was in the air in the shape of black smoke and white ash, in the shape of the shadow of the rocks.

The men on the raft lay down when there were no more intruders trying to board. Maybe now they could rest. People continued shouting from the beach, while the volcano shone with each roar.

It must have been the middle of the night when Zaid discovered the glow of lava descending towards the river. The creaking of the trees and the clash of stones increased until it became a roar that seemed to make the heavens fall. The earth was screaming as if the souls of the dead were riding on liquid fire. It was so hot that the men on the raft were delirious without waking up. When the chief woke up with a start, the others immediately did so and saw the wave of fire advancing. They gasped from the smoke and heat, clinging to the edges of the raft. They felt the tremor and movement of the displaced waters. The river had begun to rise covered in a thick mass of yellow dust, and smoke rose from the water as the lava flooded the channel. Then a wave taller than the trees began to approach them. Some dropped, others remained still. The old man sat tied with a rope, letting the raft shake him. He just blinked more than usual, and his clear eyes twinkled like two celestial points in the night, two calm skies.

Zaid covered his head and waited. He felt hit by water, branches and bodies. But the wave had lifted them up instead of knocking them down, and it swayed them like a leaf. The dragged logs hit her against the rocks, surrounded by the corpses that had refloated. Then he opened his eyes as

the raft descended again, and the waves formed again, lower this time. They resisted tied to the wood, but the raft began to break with the blows.

For the rest of the night they stayed afloat, until the same mass of water that had almost sunk them before, dragged them downstream beforeof dawn.

"The wrathful god separates us with a gesture of mercy," said one of the men, as they looked at the pointed branches nailed to the floor of the raft, reinforcing the structure and rising from the timbers like masts.

In the liquid stillness of the night, while the flames made the land they left behind disappear, they threw away the corpses that the water had thrown over them.

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In the cloudy sky, a dirty bird crossed the river. He seemed to look at them for a moment, and he disappeared from sight among the trees of the forest on the other bank.

The new channel ran through a reedbed, and they had run aground on a beach surrounded by cliffs. In the distance, downstream, they saw the bonfires of those who had managed to escape.

They woke up late in the morning, their bodies aching. At noon the man ordered Zaid:

-Go hunting.

But Zaid did not move.

"Go hunt!" He repeated.

-Aren't you going to accompany me?

-I am the one who orders and asks, grandson of Zor the Traitor.

Then the boy set off towards the forest, with a stake that he had blunted. He began to climb a long gorge, to the first trees of the forest. He looked up at the top of the trees, he couldn't even see the sky through the foliage. Only a faint light filtered through, white spots crossed by the branches and other trunks. The ground was covered with branches and trunks. A few birds screeched as he passed by. He began to walk with lost steps. He sat down to rest in a clearing, rested his forehead on his hands, and thought.

He was going hunting, but how to do it without experience, he asked himself. His father had not been able to teach him everything necessary. He remembered when Tol had talked to him about going hunting together.

"It will be the day you are as tall as my chest," he had told her, and then he pointed out the sex of the child.

For Zaid there would be two beginnings: the first hunt, and the night he would meet the first woman. But none of this happened, the volcano had intervened to avenge his grandfather's challenge.

The old man is to blame.

The only thing he found and was able to catch were turtles and partridges. He found dead birds and also put them in the bag. He was of service to anything, because he did not forget the children on the raft. He returned with the insistent idea of fleeing.

But disobedience ties me to the people. Shadows united strongly. Lines of arms and shoulders that end in Reynod's body, so large that he is no longer a man but a monster with the figure of the gods.

The man checked the bag when he returned. His face did not show compliance, but he did not reproach her. They began to cut the meat, while the old man always remained silent.

-Light a bonfire to scare away the animals. They are so hungry that they will come out of the forest to attack us.

Zaid gathered some branches and scraped one rock with another to light the fire. He looked at the man with poorly concealed fury.

"Those eyes are your grandfather's," he heard him say, "rebellious and disobedient." You all carry the same curse in your blood. I am going to tell you the story of my father, so that you understand that your slavery is reasonable and forgiven by the gods. They called him Markus of the Clear Eyes...

He told her about when he was abandoned in the forest by Zor. Several suns later, they had found him bleeding and with one foot turned into a mass of dead flesh covered in ants. The birds of prey had formed a circle around him, waiting for him to stop throwing pebbles at them and finally fall asleep. When the town's men came to rescue him, a swarm of flies rose from his worm-eaten leg.

-But he survived, with a severed foot. And instead of letting my older brothers go hunting, he wanted to continue doing it himself, and he forced me to help him. So I became his new leg. Every night he prayed to the gods to restore my father's health, because I did not want to be the support on

which he placed the stump to throw his spear. Most of the time he failed, and a horrible cry would shake him, and I felt that tremor in my back. I cried too, because I hated Zor, and I also hated my father for being nothing more than a useless man. But it was not the gods who answered me, but the sorceress. She gave him a new footing. My father woke up one morning walking proudly, but the next night his leg had started to fill with worms. He gave him the foot of a dead man, and every two or three days a new leg was reborn to become rotten soon after. I still wonder why the old woman punished my father when Zor was to blame for everything.

He sighed deeply, stoked the fire, and continued speaking.

-At first he cut himself. After a long time, having learned it by watching, one day I asked him: Can I do it? He looked at me with compassion and pain, with extremesadness, but it was a look full of beauty. Not even the gods have those eyes.

The man rubbed his hands in front of the flames. It was almost night, the ash continued to fall like flakes of dry snow.

-It was I who cut off each new foot from then on, with the bone knife that he himself had molded. We couldn't know when that curse was going to stop. He told me that he would resist, that not even the sorceress's stubborn cruelty could last so long. Time passed, and our ritual of cutting the leg and throwing it into the river became a custom that had almost stopped bothering me. But one day my father and I went to see the witcher. He gave her a knife, and after using it twice, one morning no new leg emerged. The stump was dry and odorless, and we both missed not having to use the edge of the knife again. We buried him, and never came back to look for him. But at that time of evening when he used to cut off the leg, we would remain silent, watching the fire until it was time to go to bed.

For a while they did not speak again. They didn't look at each other either.

"Where is he now?" Zaid asked later.

The other looked at him surprised at first, then responded indifferently.

-If you don't see what is in front of your eyes, I'm not the one who is going to tell you.

He thought he didn't understand. But as he looked around at the objects around him, he came across the old man, and he knew that it was Markus. He didn't want to know more for that night. Thinking about his family now made him suffer. He looked at the man who had his eyes on the sky, under the black weight of the night. Zaid looked at him for a while as if he could see the truth in his face, but the fatigue of the last few days brought him to sleep.

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When he woke up in the morning, someone had turned him face down. His face was against the ground and his throat was filled with dirt and sand. But above all he felt a sharp pain that was hurting him. He believed he was still under the force of the dream world, perhaps the vengeful spirit of the mountain was using him as part of the punishment.

But he felt cold hands touching him, and he screamed as if a stake had been driven into his bones. That's what he called what was happening to him. That's how he thought of it, because the other way, the true name, was not only impossible to accept, but also to imagine. He thought about his father, about what Tol would say if he saw what they were doing to him, and Zaid suffered from shame, not just pain.

He recognized the smell and the weight swaying behind him, the acrid breath of him panting and the dirt of his beard brushing his neck. His repeated penetration made him imagine his body as a vessel into which the other spit his organs. His own chest swelled with the presence of the stranger, and from his mouth came what he had eaten the night before. The screams of the man behind him then turned into moans.

When the other finally moved away from him, he dropped next to him, face up and his chest still heaving, shadowed by the clouds of the pale sky. He was still moaning with hoarse snorts from his tired throat. He was sweating, and he hadn't tried to cover himself yet. He looked satisfied, with an expression of fullness and lax rest on his face.

And Zaid knew that from that moment he had become a woman like the one a few nights before on the raft, an object of satisfaction. Then his lucidity was awakening from the mist into which his eyes had entered, and his tears would have been the envy of the river.

the altered initiation reversed the deserving of the pain this is not what my father said was going to happen to me this is not

The thoughts came and went too quickly, leaving behind a trace of pain. The world as he knew it was gone. And now he inhabited a new, torn body. But the memory still remained in the other: the diaphanous body of the child he had been.

The man laughs. His hands move over his chest, his fingers follow a music that only he hears. The rhythm he used on my body opening rough trails that weren't there before. Creator of the new species that inhabits me.

Slave matrix.

That's what he heard people say, or at least he imagined it. But where could he have imagined it, he told himself.

Slave array... array... array...

He repeated the voice around him.

"Slave matrix..." the man's voice said clearly this time.

Beyond was the old man, who had seen and heard everything without moving. Zaid stretched out an arm towards him, but he couldn't get up, his legs hurt. He was sure for a while that he never would, that he was going to stay there the rest of his life, with his mouth against the floor and watching the world go by behind him.

Slave matrix.

The deep voice was now a litany echoing in his head, because the man had fallen asleep. He remembered the few laws that his father had managed to teach him. , when she forced him to recite them every night, preparing for the hunt they would never do together. He thought about that law that spoke of the helplessness of victims.

Give them the opportunity to defend themselves. Surprise them with cunning, not with traps.

Time passed, and the man continued sleeping. The wait became more desperate than the memory. He would have liked to let the learned words be lost along with the honor. They were impregnated with so much whiteness that they were almost impossible to repeat.

He had to do something, his body was asking him for it. He was going to change things, it was necessary to turn around and modify that position. But above all, abolish the voice of memory. And he saw very close the stake that he had taken to the forest to hunt.

He tried to move, slowly moving each of his heavy and painful bones. The old man watched him make that effort, without giving him away.

Zaid reached for the stake and slowly stood up. His injured thighs bled, and his back slowly woke up. He took two steps towards the man's sleeping body.

"What's his name?" He asked the old man in a whisper, because he didn't want him to wake up.

In the old man's clear eyes he discovered a shine, a transparent layer of coldness.

"I can't say," he answered. -If I say his name, something will make me get up and stop you.

"Then shut up," Zaid told him. His voice already had the tone of a man. He raised the stake above his head. He looked at the sky, at his hands holding the weapon under the faint light of the gray clouds. He closed his eyes and thought about his father. Then he stopped for a moment. Then he muttered something that the old man didn't understand, and he only opened them again by lowering the stake with all the force he was capable of, against the man's chest.

He saw a rattle and a spasm of open eyes. The static expression of his fear. His hands shook for a long time, and the shaking slowly decreased. The hair on her body stood on end and her blushes soon took on the hue of dried vegetation. His legs moved, defending himself from nothing, from a stake driven into another part and into another body, regions forever separated from what had once been a single man.

Zaid was wiser now. He looked at the old man and he flinched involuntarily for the first time since he had met him. Then the old man took out his legs that had been wrapped under a blanket during the entire trip, got up and walked, dragging one leg, towards his son.

Then Zaid felt the faint hope crumble that the man's story was a hoax, and his grandfather's guilt did not exist. Markus's body, all the helpless and feeble figure of him, showed the evidence.

The old man had only one foot.

Sulla looked back one last time, but Tol and Zaid had already disappeared among the others. She looked around her again, thinking about the group of children she had taken care of until then, but many were lost or her parents had taken them away. Why, she wondered, should she feel responsible to those who rejected her as a sick member of the same body that was the people. She had been in charge of giving them food, of preventing them from fleeing or getting lost on the roads while they migrated. Sometimes she would even breastfeed them at the same time that she had had her own children, or else she would give them milk from the breeding goats, which she also had to herd, because the other women would separate themselves from that work if She Sulla was with them. But all that now seemed like a dream compared to what she was seeing: stones of fire falling on men and women. She longed for the hut she and Tol had built hoping to stay there forever.

"When it's not the witch who decides, it's the gods," she murmured.

But her son Sigur had not heard her. The boy cried, clinging to her hand, running with her and stumbling. Then she carried him on her shoulders and a shudder of pain ran down her back. She had never recovered from that ailment since she had given birth to the child, now almost as big as her brother even though he was younger.

People passed by her, some fell and clung to her legs. Sulla broke away and continued running. She needed to see the witcher, she told herself. Tol was a member of an ancient family, and she, his wife, had to be respected despite the misfortune that old Zor had brought upon them.

She could no longer distinguish the river between the people and the haze of smoke and ash. She had to put Sigur down again, but the boy stumbled every few steps and sank into the mud. He had hurt knees and an injured back. Her son began to cry just then, hugging his mother. She picked him up again and the tears cooled Sulla's skin. She took off her linen tunic and continued naked under the body of her son. She thought of water reliefiador, and the thought was as welcoming as if he had immersed himself in a lake.

The road was full of ash pits. There were bodies with open arms and legs, as if they were simply resting, with that naivety with which death sometimes covers men.

But there is no innocence in the dead, her father had told him. When looking at them, one realizes that they already know everything, hence the silence and closed eyes. She felt her throat, dry and irritated by the smoke, fill with blood, and she spat out dark saliva. The child had fallen asleep on her chest, but he was also coughing.

"Calm down, son," he said in his ear, barely patting his injured back. He decided to walk more slowly to rest, and began to tell her the legend of a distant region where the world was made of water, a limitless expanse that they called the sea. But although the murmur of his voice had managed to calm him, he broke down with fatigue. Sulla's knees fell into the mud and she began to cry. She looked around for help.

A man lay motionless. A woman was panting, and she was staring at her without blinking. Many kept passing by and told her something that she did not understand. In all her looks there was an artificial, deceptive shine. Like the reflection of midday on the open eyes of a dead man.

Nobody recognized her, either. Her skin, previously so dark and tanned by the sun, was torn and covered by a white mask. She needed the warlock's protection, the tragedy was bigger than the conflict with Zor, and she knew that would unite them with the town again.

The crows were approaching and flying very low. When she looked up, her eyes filled with smoke, and she had to scrub incessantly.

-Out! "Get out!" She shouted, squeezing the child, but the crows did not want to abandon her.

Near sunset, everything was a great gray mass in which figures without outline could be seen. She suddenly heard the sound of churning water and she began to run. The dust rain was becoming less dense near the river. She

saw the women who were diving, the children who were no longer crying. But almost on the shore, Sigur's body became imperceptible, and she had the fleeting sensation of carrying in her arms the shadow of something that had once been a child. An absence, she told herself, the exact emptiness of her body.

But none of this was going to worry her now.

She dove in and Sigur woke up exhilarated, kicking and crying.

People jumped and she looked relieved as if that afternoon were as eternal as the soul of the gods, and the water an extension of her pious hands. But Sulla, like Tol's mother, whose memories he had told her many times, did not really trust the creators.

Their will is malicious, they won't do what you ask, and you will never know what they want, she used to say.

The woman had died when Tol was still very young, but through the memory of her son, Sulla had learned what made the family that she decided to join different. That trait of helplessness in believing, which made them doubt everything and everyone, except their own family.

But the others no longer looked at her with particular animosity. No one really paid much attention to the others. First there was the caressing relief of the water calming the sores, only later would the recovered lucidity come. And between the splashing of the water and the voices of the children, even before recognizing her own voice asking for help, she saw the witch on the opposite beach.

The small waves lapped the mud-covered sand, reaching the wounded, who collected the water and poured it on their faces. Reynod's slender figure stood out among the others, tall, with severe movements, always sure of himself. The helpers accompanied him while he put his healing ointment on the sick.

The image of him was a consolation, it was the strength that Sulla had sought, and he only had to find a raft that would take her to him. A group of men were building them upstream. She returned to the shore and walked there. The logs were still warm and gave off splinters of charcoal as the men split them with their axes. Many were fighting to get on the rafts, but she slipped between them, making her way and fighting with her elbows. She sat in the middle of a group of women, and it was then that she recognized the knots she had once seen Tol tie. Watching the builders as she sailed away on the raft, she thought of her husband. She remembered the afternoons when Tol would build things for her, sitting on his knees next to the children. The thick brown beard, the dark-eyed gaze fixed on the boards molded by her tools.

The men were still busy at the work of knotting the trunks with leather or braided reed ropes. She tried to recognize her husband in that group, but it was impossible. Other rafts drifting away from her obstructed his view of her, full of children and women who loved them. They tried to keep them quiet. She thought she heard a familiar voice from one of them.

-Father!

Zaid's voice. Sulla looked up searching for the source of the voice, but perhaps, she thought, she had only imagined it.

Arriving at the opposite beach, she mingled with the crowd that was moaning and praying in different groups along the beach. She raised her shoulders to move forward without fear, she had seen that they looked at her and recognized her. Her long, dark, curly hair danced across her back. Sigur walked beside her hand in hand. She looked almost arrogant in the way she walked. The other women began to murmur, making way for her as she advanced.

"She's Tol's wife," they said, with a sneer on their lips, but then they looked down at her when she passed by them. That image of mother and son walking together and without stopping, as if both were willing to challenge them even with their weak bodies, worried them.

Sulla stopped behind the witcher, and before the silence that everyone gave her when she saw her, Reynod turned around. No one could guess if it was surprise or fury that was expressed on her face. The ritual painting was uniform, a mask of straight lines that crossed the face from the forehead to the mouth, black stripes representing death, splitting, the fissure in the men's faces.

The face is the soul divided into regions, an area of the world separated by rivers carrying dying water from the mountains to the nameless sea, the mass of liquid sky that receives the souls of the dying. There are also stars that the sea never reaches, but the silver fish in the moonlight are precocious stars towards nothingness.

The words Reynod spoke at the beginning of each funeral rite were pious compared to those he now insisted on proclaiming. The voice of the volcano seemed to use him as a messenger.

"Zor's entire family is determined to destroy us, and they do not cease in their rebellion!" He shouted.

Sulla fell to her knees, frightened.

"I come to humbly beg you for help, that's all," she said, clasping her hands and resting them on the witcher's feet.

-Humility does not exist in your blood or your ancestors, nor will it ever have a place in your descendants! Rebellion led us to the punishment of the Gods!

Reynod grabbed the wooden bugle and made a short, shrill sound of fury. Then he opened his tunic, revealing his hairless chest, took out a stiletto and placed it on Sulla's head. The brightness of the instrument caused an extensive reflection beyond what he could see on that evening. A murmur arose from the crowd. The people knew the history of the stiletto. The witcher had told them many times how, when he was very young on his purification trip to the high mountains of the South, he had found that fragment in the snow.

I decided to make a bed to rest. I dug the ground, and when I saw human bones I took them out and put them aside. Each one took me a little deeper each time, until night came, and more bones continued to appear. I felt them in the dark along their edges and then pulled them to free them from their confinement. When dawn broke, the well was so deep that I found myself submerged above my head, with a small mountain of bones ready to fall from the edge of the pit and bury me. But I couldn't help but keep searching.

All morning bones continued to emerge, but then I discovered a blinding glow, a white, stinging point as hot as a dagger in my eyes. Something like a sun buried in the mountain. I covered my face with one hand, while with the other I felt through the snow and bones, when suddenly something cut my skin. My hand was bleeding, but I didn't care at the time. I managed to touch the ends of the object, and pulled. Then the stiletto shone in my hands, even more brilliant in the full sun.

I held it up from my eyes, trying to find a position where it wouldn't shine as much. It was then that I saw a radiant image on one of the faces. The only figure, the only possible image consistent with the voices that speak to me. The origin of the stiletto is the same with which the Gods were made.

Then I prostrated myself in the snow and extended my arms to the sky. I began to pray, placing the stiletto on a rock. And the voices helped me, because I knew what I had to do. I got back up and climbed the dirt wall to the pile of bones. I stuck the stiletto into them and the bones broke more delicately than with the stone ax or a mace. It is the fingers of the Gods, I told myself, it is their nails that cut the material with which men are made. It is the instrument of obedience and punishment.

Everyone was, then, irremediably sure that the brightness was going to illuminate the gray day of the catastrophe again, and they covered their eyes.

Sulla knew that a cut with the stiletto on her scalp meant more thanThe unmistakable sign of slaves was death. And his movement was a reaction

that did not exist in the submissive, in the narrow-minded who were born to serve others. He withdrew his head, and a gasp arose from around him.

-Oh, you rebels! "They are forever punished!" said the witcher. And as he once again proclaimed the curse for Zor's family, he looked at Sigur. It was this look that gave rise to something more precise than fear in Sulla's spirit. Nothing that happened was important compared to those eyes, not even the traces of suffering. The terrible thing was the total certainty, the awful premonition that the child was in danger of death. He picked up his son and ran. He heard the footsteps chasing her over leaves and mud. Although she knew she was defeated, she felt that the boy's body was part of her again.

But the men were stronger, their legs longer and faster, and the distance became shorter. No doubt they would have hit her if the image of the sorceress had not suddenly appeared in front of her. The old woman, they said, was capable of moving through the air with the same ease as on the ground.

She had appeared next to her, one hand raised toward the hunters. Then a black word, with a sound like the crackling of fire and the chewing of worms, came from the old woman's lips. The hunters' footsteps disappeared, leaving no trace that they had ever passed through those lands.

The sorceress looked like a scarecrow with one arm raised. Her dark eyes and center turned with serenity and free from the worry of time. Age or death had no effect on her body.

The story of the sorceress was already a legend when Sulla's ancestors were alive. Some said they had seen it flying above clouds of smoke, emerging from the bonfires to take multiple forms. Others saw her moving over the water and trees on a pair of snakes that took her to the caves of the Lost Mountains, where she had her home.

No one ever knew where she had come from, nor how she created the strange lights of the night sky at the time of the festivals that commemorated the origins of the town. In the caves, she and her apprentices held meetings, old women over a hundred years old who no one ever saw arrive or leave along the paths that had to be crossed to reach the caves. Maybe they came down from the sky, many said, or emerged from the earth, or transformed into animals.

She was tall, and since Sulla had never seen her so close to her before, he was amazed by her clothing. A tunic of violent colors covered her from her shoulders, sewn with torn fabrics from other even more ancient garments. Sometimes, figures could be distinguished on her dress that changed shape depending on the light or the distance from which they were observed. Her hair sparkled with the reflection of the sun between the clouds of dust, it was gray but it shone like ash between her fathoms. The

smoke formed a dull hue on her skin, which nevertheless shone full of red spots. She was young at times, and extremely old a while later; she was both at the same time, neither at other times.

Sulla knelt in a bow to kiss her feet. Sigur was crying and coughing.

"Don't you see that your son needs you?" said the old woman.

Sulla feared her wrath and wiped his eyes, sat on a rock and cooed at the child. Neither the murmur of the wind nor the noise of men now reached the lonely forest in which they had taken refuge.

-I remember when Tol's mother came to see me, a long time ago...-the sorceress began to tell, her face had taken on a gentler expression-...concerned about the election of the tribe chief in which Zor I was going to participate. She had a feeling that she had never dared to talk about to her husband. She thought that the great remorse of someone very close would cause her men to fail. A vague thing, you see, but perhaps it was going to be revealed on that occasion. Please, Wise Knower, I need to know, she begged me. I placed a hand on her forehead, and the answer was there, between my fingers, a figure that also formed in the clouds. But I'm sure she never understood me.

Sulla looked at her with imploring eyes, and the old woman realized the question she wanted to ask him.

-I don't know, don't even ask. Where they are, it is not my duty to know unless they ask for my help. Your husband was with me in search of a concoction for his father. Both were born to be renewers of their people. The same as your son Sigur, the youngest, but the chosen heir. He is the only thing I can tell you.

Then a shadow darkened her face and a sentence of silence closed her mouth. The sorceress looked like a stone sitting on another stone. Maybe she wasn't even there, Sulla thought, or her words would have been spoken. She thought she had dreamed, but she knewI was awake. Then she lay down on some bushes, with the son on her chest.

Where to flee... how to protect him from sacrifice?

Disobedience is a flower that is born among the plants, the bodies of my family.

The old woman stood up and took her hand. They walked together to leave the forest, they found no one around.

-You are going to sleep. When you wake up, I will show you the way.

Sigur was lying next to his mother again. The insects began to flutter over the boy's wounds. She shooed them away, but the movement of her

hand became clumsy, then weak, as her eyelids began to close, until she finally fell asleep.

The ants climbed onto her body.

The sorceress prepared the altar and moved the earth with her feet. She entered the forest again and returned dragging with one hand the carcasses of twelve deer. She gathered green branches from the young trees and placed them on the animals.

At the bottom of the forest, in its center, there was silence. The old woman looked over there, and the fire lit up next to her. The smell of fresh branches added to the aroma of the corpses. Burnt bones and flesh. Crackling of branches and skeletons. The smell mingled among the leaves like an order to be obeyed without resistance.

The language of bodies and their new life came from fire. The essence of the dead lived in the renewing smoke.

Sulla woke up choked by smoke. She saw the bonfire animated by the old woman with quick movements of her long, skinny, white fingers. The flames devoured her food, without extending beyond what the old woman had ordered them to do.

Can fire speak? Does fire kill and create, or are they the voices of those who have killed?

And her voices now spoke to him with the old woman's lips, her hand extended toward Sulla, and a finger pointing to her son Sigur of her.

-You must bury your son to save him.

The voice had now become clear and hard like a stone hitting Sulla's forehead.

-Bury?

- Bury it so they don't discover it.

-Kill my son?

-I didn't say that word! Don't you dare put words in my mouth!

The crackling of the campfire became more intense. The smoke and the smell choked her. She covered Sigur's mouth, but the boy's eyes were red.

-How am I going to do it?

-Is your problem. There is no much time. You are going to go in search of the region of the Dead Eye Trees.

-Where?

-You will have to think. You make me angry with your questions. I thought I was talking to a woman worthy of the men in your family. That is your good, the only element that will redeem you, because your children no longer belong to you.

And she disappeared, along with the fire and the smoke and the smell.

Silence again after the last word. Not even footprints remained on the ground, only the memory that something had happened in that place. The sound of the river, the murmur of the crowd, and the thunder of the volcano had been reborn. Even the scent of lava and hot winds reappeared from some distant exile of time.

Ahead was the forest and the unknown area to which she must take Sigur.

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Three days later, she came to a coniferous forest with strangely twisted branches. Sulla felt that the trees were watching her on that dark afternoon in the center of the forest. Sigur continued clinging to her hand, shaking from the cold and tired, his eyelids were closing but he let himself be carried away by his mother, tripping over the branches or roots that protruded from the ground.

They found dead animals with open wounds or shreds of flesh that had come off when the spears were pulled out. Some baby foxes howled, licking the body of the dead female at times. Sigur stopped to look at them, Sulla thought he saw pity in her son's eyes.

-Your father will teach you that females with babies should not be killed.

That was the legacy of the hunter learned from the ancestors, the closest of whom had been Grandfather Zor, once the most respected man in the town. And with that fresh, grass-clear memory of that long-ago sunny day now coming to her mind, she told Sigur of the time when she had followed Tol and old Zor.

-She had been engaged to your father for a short time. He and your grandfather allowed me to accompany them to the entrance of the forest to take care of the provisions. They entered and disappeared into the gloom with the last song of the birds at the end of that afternoon. The wolves were

still silent. She knew they would howl later in the twilight. I was so attracted to the forest that I couldn't resist the idea of following them even though it was forbidden to me. But I had already done the same thing with my father once, that's why I followed in his footsteps.

“I saw the shadows of the bodies moving between the branches, touching them but almost without making a sound. They pushed aside the bushes with one arm and held the spear with the other. They walked along the banks of the stream and drank, then stopped. They went at noon to rest under the shade of the trees. Tol picked some strawberries and shared them with his father. The beards were dyed with purple spots.

“They didn't say a single word until they started on their way again. His movements were slow, his arms and legs didn't even touch each other or the rest of his body. They were like large rustic flowers sliding through the forest, molding themselves to her shape, clinging to her like lovers entering the center of her.

“But while I was trying to keep an eye on them, I tripped over a rock hidden among the dead leaves and stubbed my foot. I couldn't help the moan that I tried in vain to keep between my lips. They heard me and turned around. I had to escape before they saw me, but as she ran, she thought about the anxious looks on her face when they turned around. Their thick beards, one gray and the other young, their lips moistened and their nostrils dilated, sniffing out the scent of the prey.

“They chased me with their spears raised and running like agile deer. Two human bodies differentiated only by the signs of time. I heard the rumble of her footsteps on the creeping grass.

“I followed the entire length of the only path I found free, the stems and thorny leaves hurt me. I knew that I would be punished if they found out about my daring, and Tol would surely reject me too. Even my skin gave me away, because it has the color of a dark animal sneaking through light green foliage. I fell to the ground and began to crawl to the stream to get wet and throw off old Zor's sense of smell. I didn't even get close before I felt their shadows behind me.

“I was lost, and if I didn't scream my life would also go away because of the wounds that my own lover was going to give me. They surrounded me, just a few steps from the ferns where I wanted to hide. I saw Tol's spear, parting the branches, and I had no choice but to scream. The birds fled in flocks from the trees, the branches shook and the flapping of their wings faded away, slowly moving away.

“But my crying continued, even long after the spear stopped not far from my chest.”

Sigur had been watching her while she spoke. Afterwards her eyes were lost in sleep, and she then spoke to him again to prevent him from

falling asleep. But she felt that they were still watching her from the sides of the tree path. Small lights similar to the shine in her eyes. The inhabitants of the forest were dead. Perhaps it was the reflection of the moonlight in the open eyes of those who had perished while fleeing.

"Mom!" said Sigur.

The boy fell to the ground and refused to continue. Sulla carried him on his shoulders, wondering where the region of the Dead Eye Trees could be. The sorceress had assured her that when she arrived, she would sense it. But the longer they took, the closer the witcher's hunters would get. He looked at his legs, they were thin like a deer's, but strong. Her thighs transmitted that force to her back, and the boy's body hung from his neck like a necklace of bones.

She crossed streams, climbed rocks and bathed in waterfalls. He made marks on the bark of the trunks, but they were not for her, perhaps they would serve Sigur after her, if he survived. On the third night after entering that forest, she stopped in an area where the trees formed a wide circle. There was no grass in the middle, just dry dirt. He worried her approaching. If it was an altar to some god, she had to be sure to which of them she was going to give her son.

She stayed away from the center, surrounding it, hiding between the trunks separated from each other by a distance so exact that it seemed deliberate. The trees caught his attention. They were not tall like the ones she had seen until then in that forest, but with round, leafy crowns, with wide leaves like open palms. She couldn't make out the color in the dim light, but they looked red, and broke when touched. The moonlight flickered with multiple eyes among the leaves. She then knew that she had arrived at the place designated by the sorceress, and she took Sigur by the hand.

When they were inside the clearing, they prepared to wait. Time passed and the silence showed that it was just an ordinary night, just another night. Everything she had experienced seemed to her at that moment a meaningless dream: the explosion of the mountain, the disgrace of the family, the persecution of her son. In the calm of that place lived the last vestige of peace, a space where time had mercy on men. The chirping of crickets, the call of owls, sounded like songs of reconciliation. The bats touched Sulla's face with the smell of her hair and the dew carried by her night breeze.

But then the land they were standing on began to sink. It was dry land but too soft, similar to sand, and the same thing happened in cagives place where they stopped.

-This is what the Sorceress wanted to tell me! -She shouted excitedly, while the boy looked at her, surprised.- The only way to hide in the forest!

When the pursuers arrived, she would point out the grave showing what she had been able to do to free him from her hands. She explained to Sigur what they were going to do, but the boy wanted to sleep, nothing more, and that tiredness was her right ally. He would sleep until there was no longer any danger.

Sulla started digging. The space she needed was not large, and when she saw the small pit at her feet, she was shaken by a fear that she knew needed to be repressed. She trusted the sorceress as much as the women in her family had always done, as Tol's mother had believed with a strength only equal to her distrust of the gods.

She laid Sigur on the bottom, the boy was already sleeping. Then she tied several green stems together, forming a hollow cylinder, and put the instrument in her son's mouth. She then kissed him on the forehead.

She kissed him and I was amazed at her beauty, that she had been the creator of whom I must now bury. I kiss him again, I look at him again and again.

I'll pretend I killed him. But I doubt. I tell myself I can't do it, abandon it. I will never know if I have actually saved him.

I know that time continues to pass against me.

I won't see him again.

She returned the earth to its place, on Sigur's body, who was breathing harmoniously. She made sure that the branches carrying her air remained firm above ground level.

When she saw that everything was ready, she lay down next to her and slept. But her ears did not rest. The singing of the sacrificial drums was getting closer.

It was already dawn. The footsteps echoed loudly, the entire forest repeated the blows. Sulla saw the foliage shake, and the hunters appeared. Their black painted faces were like stains, remnants of the night, fungi that grew between the leaves and withered them. They ran towards her and lifted her from her arms. They pressed the points of their spears against Sulla's body and asked for Sigur. She shrugged her shoulders. They tied her against a log and whipped her, while others searched around her for the child. Then they let her go and put her face down on the ground, two of them stood on her back.

Sulla could barely breathe now. She saw her feet running through the trees, searching behind the bushes, between the branches. The hunters cursed, but she had stopped suffering, she already knew that Sigur was

worth much more than a battle won to them. The child was the future incarnate.

"Where is he?!" They asked again, and they pressed her to the ground.

Sulla felt them penetrate her, one after the other, and the round was repeated until the men were tired.

I shouldn't complain. I will take the poison from his blood and take responsibility for my faults and his. I will carry the weight of her bodies in my belly. I will make them born again. I will be your mother, and you will not have to apologize to me. They will be flesh and part of my bones, I will give them permission to break them. And they will cry, hurting me through tears, and I will take them in my arms again. Between lamentations and cries, they will suckle my whitish blood, reddened milk. Mine forever, honoring the only one they cannot hurt. The one with the body that stands between them, the giant child among child men. My son Sigur, who despite me will survive.

The distant drums continued to pronounce words of hard and pitiful rhythms. When they lifted her up again, she saw that the naked bodies of the men had black circles, they now formed a circle that was dissolving in front of her. She felt that she was stepping on water and not on land, that she was flying over black waters that expanded in concentric circles. Then she saw the white sky of dawn, and on her back the dust and thorn leaves. But she could not see the spears buried with the points upwards on which they had placed it. She didn't scream because she felt nothing. But the men shouted in triumph as they began to drag her over the edges. Sulla's body was crossed by deep stripes of dead flesh, marked like a plowed land, a field about to be sown.

They carried her away carrying her on top of her arms, exposing her body to the warmth of the sun that was drying the blood, while the flies covered it. The hunters and their prey were lost in the dawn fog.

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A head poked out of the ground in the morning. Like a rock confused among the ivy, with eyes like white larvae hidden in the lumps of mud. He had seen that woman so similar to her mother that she cried among the men. Bodies intertwined like wolves, shaking around her and hitting her.

Her mind was growing too fast, carried away by an anger that didn't even give her time to curse, or cry, or writhe with hatred, helplessness. The only thing he was certain of, the single idea of enough strength to overcome that other thing he wanted to discard, was that the earth imprisoned him.

That was a simple fact that perhaps he could resolve, free from despair or overwhelming, recent memories.

So he waited. The sun had risen and shone on him. He chewed the green stems that he had found on his lips when he woke up. The sap cooled his throat.

At noon, a girl appeared running towards him from the mist that had darkened the outlines of the trees. She looked at him for a moment and began to dig around her. He watched her struggle and pant with exhaustion. Her nails had been bruised, and her hands and chest were dirty with dirt. But she was smiling.

Sigur found himself freed, and the girl stared at him. She was slim, delicately beautiful. Then she shook the dirt off her hands, and started laughing very hard. He had noticed that he was covered in a funny shell of dried mud, and laughed with her. And as he rubbed her skin, he asked her where she came from. The girl only responded by raising her shoulders.

"My name is Sigur," he said, and he also wanted to know her name.

"All of them, and none," she answered, without giving him time for anything other than to hear in his now mature and almost old voice, all the possible names. Without allowing her anything more than to watch her disappear transformed into the expert connoisseur of the spells that rule the world.

And changing her appearance once more, she took flight over the trees in the form of a great black bird.

She walked along the muddy river beach. Her thick robe covered her strong body, although her skin showed the deterioration of age beneath the sparse, child-soft hair. Her followers were behind and safe with her protective figure, walking on their knees while kissing the blanket dragged over the dirt and the dead.

"Pray for us, Great Voice of the Gods!" they said. Many others cried and pointed high at the birds flying over the corpses.

"Silence!" he ordered. But no matter how much they obeyed him, the faces of the wounded could not help but look desolate.

"We will die!" the women repeated in a liquid chorus of words and tears. The screams could be heard coming even from the most distant shelters, and she ascended to the sky like a mist rejected by the rain.

In her left hand was the leather bag with the black ointment to heal the wounded. He would pronounce a prayer in a low voice, and the people would calm down to join in the prayer with lowered eyelids and clasped hands. Thus she had taught them to pray, after many efforts and punishments so that they would forget the frenetic dances that had been part of their rites.

Reynod was not her real name. Not the one that her father had bequeathed to her and that the people she now ruled transformed into a rudiment of the original. But he had been born again when he arrived in that region of Droinne, and he also deserved a new name, if not totally different, at least different from the one he reminded his father of. He had to forget it forever. He had long been the Great Witch who healed the sick and spoke

with the gods. And no one had ever questioned his wisdom until Zor's challenge arose from among men to accuse him of lying to the people with false gods.

The hunter had raised his voice for him from the congregation attending the midday ceremony. His tall figure towered over the heads of the others. His hair was long and curly, dark as weeds on an autumn night. The hoarse, strong voice, and those brown eyes that were accusing him like no one had ever dared to do before.

"Sacrifices!" Zor had shouted. -Even when!

But it wasn't his words that bothered him, but the concealing tone he used when pronouncing them, like a message he was sending only to him, because only he would understand it. Reynod was then sure that the threat was still latent since that day when both had attended the initiation rites together.

Reynod covered his face with his arms, thus expressing that the silence that that voice had caused among the others hurt him.

-What blasphemy!

The assistants looked at each other, they didn't know what to do in the face of such audacity on the part of a man so respected in the town. Then one of them grabbed a spear and ran towards Zor, while the crowd also began to rush. pounce on him.

"No!" Reynod shouted, raising his arms. There was now an expression of tolerance on his face beneath the green and black paint, the lines dividing his face in multiple shapes. “We won't hurt him.” He and his family from today will be slaves if they want to remain under our protection. It is the only thing that the goodness of the gods allows me. I am a generous but misunderstood spirit.

Then he came down from the altar, his gaze darkened by a sorrow that only he seemed capable of consoling, surrounded by his subjects who confirmed his fidelity. He looked up as he walked away into the crowd around him, and saw Zor left alone, standing in the middle of the sacrificial field. The earth caked and hard, without grass, under the feet of who had once been his friend.

The birds insisted on continuing to fly over the corpses, stubborn like that death that seemed to come sailing on a raft, crossing the river.

The black figure of him, the gray mask that hides empty eyes. There he is, watching from the raft, and he has a child clinging to his hand. She jumps into the water with the child and reaches the beach.

The sky had taken on the color of the crows' feathers, which flew low despite the cries and the stones that were thrown at them, despite the

bonfires whose smoke was supposed to keep them away. Reynod shaded himself with his hands against the reflection that came from the surface of the river. He turned around and continued with his work. He didn't want to look into her eyes. The hands of the people clinging to him to obtain the blessing gave him security.

And then he felt the call of a rough, cold hand on his back.

When he dared to look, Sulla was there.

"I come to beg you for help, Grand Master," she told him. It was that voice just like the one he imagined the dead figure on the raft would have, also similar to the divine voices that flowed continuously like the water and fire of the volcano. Looking into her eyes, he saw the other, inhabiting that woman to spy on the world from that invisible side of the vast spectrum of reality.

But behind her someone was watching him. A man from the village, with his clothes undone and his face deformed by burns. And although it was evident that he was dead, two words formed on the man's lips: the victim.

He then lifted a wreath of seaweed from the beach, and placed it on Sigur's head.

Then the dead man lay down again on the sand.

Then Reynod closed his eyes, nodded, and knew that the gods did not need old blood, but new flesh whose value lay not in its weight, but in its potential. Because the burden of the future is always greater than the size of the past.

Almost without realizing that his hands were trembling, he touched the stiletto under his tunic, tied with a leather belt to his body. He took out the small weapon before which his people always prostrated, because it was the gift of the gods to his favorite son.

But Sulla had already moved away from her, without giving her time not only to catch her, but even to order her to be stopped. Taking her son with her, she had escaped as nimbly as a deer, leaping with her long legs over the rocks, and sinking into the mud as if it were snow.

He spent the rest of the day praying and healing, while the pale sphere died towards the end of the afternoon hidden behind the ash showers. A murmur of astonishment made him look back. Confused in the dust he recognized Tol carrying his father on his shoulders. She saw him approach with a slow step, leave the old man on the sand, and sit down to rest.

Old Zor was the same age as him, but he was getting older. All those years that he kept the curse on his caste seemed to destroy him more than

the guilt of disobedience. Because what else had it been but to insist on staying in the town when he should have left taking his family with him. Rather than having to constantly watch them like insects that can't be killed, he would have preferred to see them go. Because who in that family wouldn't know the truth about Reynod, if even in the children's eyes he saw the threat. Zor had remained like a thorn in the palm of his hand, and there was nothing left for him but to get rid of them. But he had waited too long. He could no longer end it simply with death. A man with the hunter's ancestors, he was not easily eliminated or silenced. Now Zor was mortally wounded, at last, and the anxiety of the quick outcome increased in his soul.

The distant ethereal voices of the gods had spoken to him of the explosion in his dreams, of the unrest that grew in the depths of the volcano, of the multitude of souls that regained their strength from him. The spirits under the command of the mountain god.

The fire of the world is about to begin...the gods speak through the mouths of the dead...the hands bleed...the rocks are burning and the sky is hidden...the fire is eating za, the earth is shaking...the liquid flows and thickens...it rises...the souls are getting angry and exploding...they are the ones who will tear down the sky and sink the earth forever...and they will continue trembling around men...until the last one gives the last cry of anguish...and the last son of women dies of pain...

Reynod crouched over the body of a sick man, but looked at Tol from time to time. The son sought help from the others, many of whom had grown up and hunted with him. Despite holding them by the arms, so that their eyes could not be hidden even behind dirty beards or dried blood, they looked at him coldly. Afterwards, he saw him stay for a while contemplating the place where Reynod and his followers were. But he wanted to avoid the reprimands and lectures that he was forced to give every time a member of that family crossed his path.

The sick man had died and took the first ceremonial steps to entrust the spirit to the gods. A movement of the open palms upward and the fingers separated, so that the fluidity of the soul could pass between them and make the leap to heaven. The subjects observed him in silence, and imitated him.

But the mountain was speaking to him again. The enormous, multiple voice echoed in his head and he covered his ears with his hands. Then, he gradually faded, until he was that of a single man. He looked at the corpse, and heard his voice. He brought her ear close to his mouth. A while later, he raised his hand and said:

-Here are the traitors!

The people looked at Tol and recognized him, but they moved away like a sick person from whom they feared becoming infected. A murmur was

heard from mouth to mouth, and it was more important than the pain of the wounds. This was an essential event in the history of his people, a struggle between honors that elevated them above tragedy.

Tol approached Reynod and prayed for his father, with his hands on his chest and his head bowed. Ash had collected in his hair, and the shadow of a flock of crows passed quickly over them both.

Reynod then had thoughts of fatal omens. He put his hands to his face, over the black lines that divided his mind into two parts.

If you only knew what awaits you, the destiny I dare not pronounce. If, even knowing all that, I would then speak to you about the shadow and pain of my spirit, the unfathomable regions of arid waiting, thirst and hunger, of thorns and dust that they reserve for me. Places built for me, with my shadow and size, with the measurements of the spirit that inhabits and abandons me, ashamed to be called what I am, and unable to avoid it, adoring me. You must tell me, if even knowing this, you would not exchange your future gifts for a little of my perennial pains, a small part of my sorrow, a faint prick of my thorns. You must believe me, a little pain will enrich your soul.

He sought the complicity of the gods by raising his arms to heaven, and proclaimed the well-known reasons for the exile and the immediate need for human sacrifice.

-The Spirit of the Mountain must be calmed in any way. Your father is the cause of his fury.

He saw Tol's bitter expression. The hopelessness on the face of a strong but tired man. A fleetingly tearful look, although he couldn't be sure there were tears in his eyes. He felt a curious pride in this young man, who, despite everything, honored and remained faithful to his father.

Tol had returned to his father, followed by the eyes of the people. He would let him go so that his sores would kill him. Reynod had another body to offer the volcano. Then he saw them moving away again along the beach, until they were lost to sight in the smoke. The moans of the wounded once again caught the witcher's attention.

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Before the birth of Tol, Zor and Reynod used to sit on the bank of a stream after hunting, to eat plums from the trees along the way. They were looking at the sky between the trees, lying on the grass. The clouds passed,

and they were taciturn, absorbed in their thoughts, as if the corpses of the prey next to them made them think about life.

"I will teach my son the laws of hunting from a very young age, so he won't be able to forget them," Zor said, his elbows resting on the ground, and paying attention to the sound of water and the passage of some beast.

But Reynod's face darkened when he heard it. For him, the river spoke with screams, the trees with cries between the leaves, the birds with songs and words of pain. Because he heard the voices of the gods day and night. Then he stayed watching Zor with his mind full of those disturbing sounds that had forced him to always remain isolated from what he once believed he expected and deserved, the simple life and the desired offspring.

Every summer, the town prepared for twenty-five days of celebrations around the skill tests. but cad In ten years the festivals also had to choose the family that would occupy the highest rank in the town for ten winters, and for that the heads of the families had trained during the previous summer to fight among themselves. But this time it was a special occasion, Reynod had decided to bring forward the competition before the deadline, and did not consider whether he owed any explanation to his people.

The women used to light the fires very early on the first morning of summer, and they had to keep them that way to cook what their men would carry on their backs after the night's hunt. An orange light was barely emerging above the fir trees when they arrived, the shadows of the men emerged from the fog and dropped their prey. They then distributed the knives to each other and began to bleed and slaughter them, while the men went to the stream and undressed to clean the blood, because nothing needed to be said or explained to each other. They had seen their parents do the same, and they had done the same thing themselves since they had gone out hunting for the first time.

Every morning, after having hunted as required by law, they joined the entourage that surrounded the witcher and the competitors to tour the lands where they had settled two winters ago, recruiting possible candidates for the tests.

It was the witcher who was in charge of the final choice, but everyone looked at what the others had hunted and the way the women cooked the prey. Not only the smell and taste of the beasts counted for being chosen, but the way in which the fire had been prepared, the shape of the embers, and the harmony of the cuts placed on the flames.

For two nights the competitors fought each other. This time women were not allowed access to the fighting site. The men fought without weapons among the trees, with no more strength than their arms or legs. In the morning the bodies of the losers were abandoned next to a stream, where their women went to look for them.

But after the third crescent since the beginning of summer, in front of the fire in which thirteen fawns were sacrificed, the witcher announced the names of the finalists.

-I have chosen, by advice of the Gods, Zor, natural son of the lands of Droinne, and Markus, faithful descendant of those who came from the North.

The next morning, Zor said goodbye to his wife and his son, who was still barely walking, and got confused in the middle of the column of men who came to look for him. When they arrived at the forest, the town's artisans painted the ceremonial figures on their faces. For almost half the morning, they drew small human silhouettes no larger than the size of a finger on the hunter's face. They were the forms of their ancestors, those who had participated in that competition since the oldest could remember. They painted the rest of the body with red circles linked together, representing the succession of different competitions over time. Then they dressed him in a fox-skin loincloth, and tied leather ropes around his thighs to hold their weapons.

They presented him with daggers, spears and axes wrapped in large green leaves for him to choose from. He opened the pages that others were holding and chose. Then they made way for him to where the witcher was, and those who had served him and those who were waiting for him to be ready, set out after Zor.

He barely managed to see his competitor among the men who formed closed groups around each candidate. A monotonous chant that the witcher led with his trumpet from the head of the caravan, overshadowed the festivities and made this election seem the most solemn and transcendent they had ever witnessed.

Among the trees, along the paths covered with blue flowers that led to the Lost Mountains, the competitors and the witcher continued alone. The others stopped as they crossed the first rows of logs, watching them go as they walked deeper into the thicket.

The sun was already high and illuminated the slopes of the mountains, distant but already perceptible. The remains of the night still hidden in the undergrowth were fading as they advanced at the pace of an ax and hitting the boats against the branches. The animals hid in their caves, the quails watched them from their burrows. The snakes hid among the creeping ivy. Some trunks were marked with the signs of other similar competitions, and the scars had become misshapen knots.

They walked for almost the entire day, until they reached a clearing.

-Markus- the witcher ordered.- Your task will be to cut down trees to close this place as a refuge.

"Zor," he said, indicating the tallest tree. "Your task will be to climb to the highest branch, and bring the last bird you find there, alive."

The Sunlight came in faint rays through the tall, thick foliage. The reflection on the leaves gave an ocher color to the men's faces, especially on Markus's white skin. His peculiar physiognomy made him blush easily in the sun. He had white eyelashes and eyebrows. Clear eyes. Almost no color on all of his skin, and a rarely broken silence between his lips. But he was strong, he had long demonstrated it by hunting for his family of four sons. He daily carried heavy prey through the oak paths, always accompanied by his children. He was seen every night on the way to his people, with the torches illuminating his white head and the corpse of a prey on his shoulders. The two youngest children accompanied him, while several dogs followed the trail of blood.

It was still honorable for Zor to compete with that man. They had hunted together at a time when Reynod was no longer his friend, dedicated to becoming the spiritual leader of the town. If Zor ever thought of someone else to replace Reynod as a companion, it was when he saw Markus with his mute march along the mud paths between dark trees, like a patch of snow in the summer green of the forest. It didn't take him long for that trust to be confirmed later when they began hunting together, but Markus's reserved appearance had always remained an impenetrable barrier.

Zor began to climb as he heard Markus' ax hit the trees. He knew he was more skilled at running than at climbing, but as he climbed the birds began to fly among the fallen leaves. And just when he was almost at the top, his memory persisted in remembering that dream he had the night before, after praying in the forest, in the dark and warm silence of the summer that always filled him with calm. When he later fell asleep next to his wife, strange beings in black chased him

animal-like, I think. They look like them, little black rats that dig through the logs

They sneak between the leaves, the moon illuminates his fur. They get between the roots that come out of the ground, and eat them. They climb the trunks, peel them until they turn into sad skeletons

earth tremor. They are the trees that fall hollow like eggshells. Capable of crushing me. One leans on the other and they fall in a chain. Its rumble stirs up dirt and leaves, destroying bushes. I escape to the exit of the forest, towards my hut by the river. I see my wife, who is watching me with her hands covering her lips, and such a strange expression in her eyes that I feel the most terrible fear of my entire life. I see her tears, her chills running through her body as if she had a snake under her clothes.

She comes to look for me.

No! I shout at her, because I feel the logs that keep falling behind her,

she approaches. A tree begins to fall, to find her, like a lover. They are very close to each other. I can't rescue her from her anymore. I feel envious of that tree that touches her

but it is not the tree, but a form of death. And the Gods, up there, watch. I hear them laugh. It is curious how a laugh so beautiful, strong and resistant to the task of time, also has this portion of cruelty.

A fury is growing in me, I know, slowly

I will pretend that I have not witnessed such slaughter. I'll pretend I still believe in them

Even if it was nothing more than that, the harmless manifestation of an anxious mood, he knew that if he told her wife, she would go ask the sorceress and he would have to postpone the competition to finally see her calm. That was impossible now. Reynod had decided to start the festivals before the coming cold of winter prevented them from leaving, but he knew that all this had to do with Markus' interruption in the last ceremony and what he had whispered in the witcher's ear. Days later, Reynod had announced the advance of the festivals.

-If you are not willing yet, Markus will win for your resignation.

It wasn't fair that it was like that, especially knowing the coldness with which he had treated him for some time before. So he had to accept.

Its bark was resinous, and its feet were slippery. In the lower part he had taken care of the snakes by looking for the stripes of green scales, breaking them with the axe. When he managed to reach the top, he stuck his head out and protected his face from the sun. The canopy of leaves that formed the roof of the forest stretched further than he could see. The peaks of the mountains rose high to the west, and a line of water shone like a serpent in the great distance. He felt that for that moment he was far from the world of the hunters, contemplating the flocks that took flight and stirred the dust that danced in the rays of the sun, faint lines of light that descended like ropes hanging from the sky to the forest floor. .

He heard a tree fall under the strength of Markus. The birds continued to flee and cross the silhouette of the sun. The fluttering became a wind that swirled incessantly in Zor's ears. Dust, leaves, and a pungent smell of feathers.

He planted his feet in the bark, and found several empty nests on a weak branch. He reached out with one hand while he held on with the other. He could hear the call of the young in the nests. And he was already reaching to touch them when he felt the blows of Markus's ax at the base of the trunk. The nest came loose and he saw it fall. The babies were small black dots beating against the branches until they disappeared into the thicket.

He himself had seen the mark Reynod made with his stiletto on the bark of the only tree Markus was not to touch. But when he realized the trap, he knew it was too late, and the beatings weren't going to stop.

-Cursed be your children forever, Markus!

He started to go down, but he knew that time would never be enough. The tree was beginning to give way rapidly. Markus was strong and his trunk was made of tender wood. He looked for the branches of the neighboring trees, but they were far away and flimsy. He hugged the main trunk with his arms and legs, but then had to break free and held on to a strong branch.

The tree leaned, creaking and clashing branches with neighboring trees. For a moment, he was hooked on top of another until the weight made him come loose once more. And as the blood fell it left Zor's body, it was placed above him as in a bag tied to his neck, keeping his soul, until then devoted to the gods. The prayers scattered in a swirl of leaves and the dizzying background of unfinished prayers.

I'm praying after so long

I look at the gods, at their faces imagined by my dreams. A special face for each one, according to my ideas of beauty, and I have not seen much in my life: the light of dawn on the day of my initiation, the face of my wife, and little more than that. All the gods have the gentle smile of a woman on their luminous dawn bodies.

imagined. And it is to them that I pray. My own thinking.

because what is disbelieved collapses in its own death. The magic fades in its short duration

Prayers, what are they but lost words. My spirit will also be lost.

The leaves splashed his face like lashes from the waves of a turbulent river in the sky, he saw the clouds running one after another in circles, and the branches hit him and marked him with green stripes that then turned red, then white as the bones, then black like the dirt accumulated on a corpse.

Worlds passed by him after other worlds, identical because in all of them there was the same face. A face formed with sand. Eyes wide and open, a mouth with thin lips and teeth like clouds.

The peaceful face of his son Tol, waiting for him.

Just that morning that now seemed as far away as the beginning of the world, she had said goodbye to him with a serene sleepy afternoon kiss, held in the arms of his mother. The boy had tried to stay awake to watch him leave, but had finally fallen back asleep. The dream that protected children from pain. But Tol's lazy hand was awakening once more, and he

stroked his father's beard with a smile that he would never forget, no matter how many horrible worlds came to take over his spirit.

He was walking away.

His wife and his son were lost in the vegetation that he had left them. The land he conquered for them, along with the right to worship and serve it, to use it as an animal would. To establish his fertility there. And the trees and the wood with which he had built his hut also sent him away that morning.

He thought of the child, and the sweat of unfinished years formed in the folds of his forehead, and in the end, when life seemed to have been suspended or stuck in a sea of blood that was not able to drain from his body, he felt that he was still he kept spinning, and his head was trying to get in the right place. He tried to leave his eyes closed, but every time he opened them thousands of green leaves passed in front of him, and everything, even his memory, was green.

Then everything stopped, and he found himself safe in the leaves. He had done well, it would be said later, not to cling to the main trunk or resist its weight, but to follow it like another branch. He touched his legs and felt them like two heavy, insensitive masses. The wind continued to make the rest of the leaves fall on him, but he could barely feel them. A warm numbness dominated the rest of his body. But he was still alive. It was this that did not completely amaze him, and he decided to stay still on the foliage, next to the broken nests of the dead birds.

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Lying next to him, she noticed the loss in her husband's worried face. Moonlight penetrated through the cracks of the hut. She heard the owls from the center of the forest. She couldn't help but feel a shudder.

"What's wrong, woman?" Zor asked. But she was ashamed to be afraid.

"Nothing," she responded, and from then on she would not stop berating herself for disturbing him.

She thought about the visit she had made to the sorceress the day before, she remembered those images that the old woman had put on her forehead. She could feel them still etched into her skin, clear, and yet hidden from her clumsy comprehension.

Trees of all kinds, plants that she had never seen before nor had she ever imagined could exist. Leaves of countless sizes and flowers of as many colors. From the tops where the birds lived, came a murmur, not of songs, but of the wind that grows among the trees before the storm. But this time

there was not a fresh breeze with the smell of sap, but a strange aroma of corpses: the bodies of birds hung from the branches. And those bodies shrouded by flint blades emitted a thunderous sound. All the birds had perished, but they still sang, and were the growing and painful tremor with which the earth was complaining.

The labored breathing of her son Tol reached him from a corner.

What will I do, alone with the child, if something happens to Zor?

The owls were saying something to him, but suddenly they fell silent. The moon was large that night, although incomplete. She didn't need to get up and look outside to know, the owls would have continued her funeral speech if there had been a full moon. Her husband made a sudden movement while he was sleeping, hitting his leg.

"Zor," he murmured in his ear, gently shaking him by the shoulders to wake him up.

He opened her eyes, looked at her for a moment, and kissed her neck.

-They are only dreams, woman - he rubbed his face, and meditated for a moment, with his vision lost. - If nightmares ever become reality, I will hate the gods forever.

She shushed him, covering her mouth with a hand, scared of those words. But he had closed his eyelids again, and she dared not bother him again.

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They looked for him for a long time among the fallen trunks, under the sun that shone unobstructed above their heads.

"He can't be alive," Markus said.

"Don't say it until you see it, I've known him for a long time," Reynod answered.

-But no one is immortal.

-Some are even against his will-Reynod thought about his voices and visions.

-The only immortality I am sure of... -said Markus. -...it's the one my children give me, but I don't think you understand it.-And while he spoke looking at the path they were going on, he gave furtive side glances at

Reynod. The witcher started to strike him, but he stopped himself, remembering Markus's warning.

With that same impatient concern he had interrupted him one day at the sacrificial ceremony of each season, where goats and rams were immolated to the gods. He arrived pushing the penitents who were praying on their knees, and going up to the altar he approached him to hold him by the arm, as if he were his vassal. A murmur of astonishment rose from the people, but Markus ignored the guards who tried to separate him from the witcher. Reynod signaled them not to intervene. Then he heard what Markus had to say, a short, exact phrase of resentment.

He could still feel Markus's sour breath blowing in his face, the smell of the reminder that brought with it the warning, and then, inevitably, the revelation. One day he was going to arrive when what was promised, previously so ethereal and distant, would have to be fulfilled if he did not want to be taken away not only from his position, but also from his life if he let the people find out.

He had wrenched himself out of Markus's hands, slapped away the platters and the bloody skins and hides, and announced:

-When two days pass from tonight, the tests for the election of the new boss will begin! We will dedicate the rites to the Sun god!

He sounded the feathered horn with short, staccato, solemn sounds. A music that seemed to percussion the tense mantle of the earth. The men shouted, excited, at this preview of the festivals, and the women got together to organize the preparations.

Reynod remained thoughtful looking at the ram dragged by the bearers towards the town, as a token of the interrupted ceremony. He looked at the trail of blood he left, a red path indifferent to the yellowish evening sky, the beech forest and the steep rocks through which the beast must have jumped long before. In the valley and the surrounding hills, people had gathered around campfires, and the smoke rose like a gray prayer of contentment and well-being. The worship of the Sun god was a rite that he did not like, but he did not He had wanted to push too hard the old traditions of the town. Thinking about the effort it had taken him to enforce the laws dictated by his voices, he realized that he could not bear to lose everything. He was the Chosen One, and he could not destroy the plans of the gods, the millennial projects that ended in his hands. It was true that he had accepted them, but just as one accepts one's own body and old age.

That's why he closed his eyes, and fervently wished he were smaller than an ant, an insignificant thing on which the gods would not set their sights.

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He heard the footsteps approaching through the foliage, the isolated words whose meaning he could understand despite the distance. Fury contorted Zor's features, but he was unable to move. He was still on his back among the green leaves that stained his body with fresh sap. Some birds had perched on his legs, and were pecking at the dried blood, on which seeds and fruits of the purple plums had stuck. The wind swirled with the smell of crushed plums. The sun fell full in the circle opened by the fallen trees.

Hearing Reynod's voice, he remembered that old day when they were both very young.

Zor's father had taken them hunting for the first day of initiation. After an entire afternoon of killing and carrying prey to the village, they were taken back to the forest at dusk. They walked until the moon was high and they came to a clearing. The shadows of the beech trees plunged the place beyond the campfire into gray mists. They saw an old woman with long hair moving as if she were dancing, smiling in the strangest way they had ever seen. His father patted both of their backs and said goodbye.

The old woman then helped them wash off the sweat and blood that stained their bodies and hands. She heated water over the campfire, and poured it over each one, easing the pain from her tense muscles.

"They're waiting for you," she said a while later.

They followed the ailing pace of the old woman who was dragging a useless leg, along a path surrounded by flowering almond trees. The moon reflected in the flowers illuminated the place with a faint white light. The old woman took them to where there were two women next to a tree. And they saw for the first time the females of a caste that they had been forbidden to visit while they were children. They were maintained by old women with tough character and tanned skins. They lived apart and were not considered part of the town, except for occasions like that.

The women sat at the foot of the tree, without looking them in the eyes, keeping their eyes down, crossed their legs and showed the hair of their sex. Reynod approached and grabbed one of the women by the arms. She held a brief gesture of pain between her clenched lips. After her, he wrapped his hands around her neck. Zor murmured something, but Reynod didn't want to hear it. He told her to come closer and Zor took the other woman. They began to move and rub against them, making them bend over. They rested their palms on the bark of the tree, and pressed their bodies against the women's and penetrated them.

The breaths came out white, rhythmically from the mouths, in the cold of the night. Some insects landed on their backs, and the bites excited their desires even more. The women did not emit cries of pleasure or pain, they

could not speak. The old women had plugged their ears with wax since birth.

Zor sat on the ground when he finished, but he saw that Reynod was upset and in pain. He hit the woman, while at the same time she tried to hide her nakedness. When he approached Zor, he said to him:

-Can't.

Zor thought he understood. They left the clearing, and walked together toward the town. He told him about cures that he could try if he asked the sorceress. Reynod pretended to hear him, but he had become absorbed in his fury, and they did not speak for the rest of the night.

He never heard more about that matter, nor did they talk about it again. They rarely hunted together again. Reynod was always sad and silent, distancing himself from Zor with harsh responses, of pretentious superiority. Later, perhaps the following winter, he had completely distanced himself from him, as if he feared that he would betray him.

The dedication with which he later saw him dedicate himself to being a priest of the town had made him partially forget about that night. The prayers and ceremonies that he taught, the complicated rites, the laws that the divine voices dictated to him and he claimed to listen to, created a new apogee of the spirit. The soul of the town seemed to have been extinguished for a long time before Reynod's arrival, and he now revived the importance of his ancient beliefs. The younger ones were excited to hear the words of the sorcerer, the magical acts that he produced with his ointments, and especially the words of punishment. The daily sacrifices created fear among the men, but Reynod once again softened the c prayer of his people with stories that he told sitting on a rock at the end of each rite. Stories that the gods had murmured to him at night.

In the springs, every three seasons, Reynod's sons or daughters were born to mothers chosen from among the virgins. But only the surface could be obtained from the beauty of women, because he knew that it would never last long. When the children were born and handed over to the sorcerer, the mothers would have to be sacrificed.

"He has conceived with the Chosen One of the Gods," Reynod told Zor the afternoon when the first woman died at the stake. That was the last time Zor enjoyed his trust. -They must be faithful to me, and this is how I make sure of it.

He could barely hear it. A chant began to rise from the people witnessing the sacrifice. The woman could no longer be seen in the flames. The crackling of the fire played games on Reynod's face. His face shone in the luminosity of the evening, when the ashes of the campfire scattered with the night wind, and the animals came out of the forest in search of the bones.

Zor felt the heat of the flames on his beard. He squeezed Reynod's arm as the woman began to cover herself with a black cloak. Her hair had caught fire.

Reynod then looked at him suspiciously, and in his eyes he saw that definitive resentment that would never be erased again.

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For many days he was calling for the sorceress. He went to a secluded place in a reed field, on a promontory with lush vegetation and hedges of yellow flowers, from where the stars could be clearly seen. He lit fires, prayed, and cast spells that he knew pleased the old woman.

Finally she appeared.

"I was praying to you for a long time," he reproached her.

It was a cold night, but more than that, it made him shiver to see how the sounds of the forest had faded, and even the wind had stopped. The old woman looked at him with anger.

-Even the gods respond to me immediately.

-You know well where those gods come from...- she began to say, but she stopped when she saw the strange expression on Reynod's face. She smiled and said: -Could it be true that you don't know where they come from?

Reynod did not want to answer. He knew that she sought to anger him and impoverish her beliefs, to shake the altar of the voices he heard. He had never doubted, and he was not going to distrust now something as tangible as those ancestral echoes.

-They are the gods, and I am not allowed to question them, that is why I am forced to resort to your magic.

He spoke to her about his ineptitude for procreation, the difficulty of carrying out an act that even the simplest animal could do effectively. The sorceress's laughter echoed in Reynod's head, and he would have wanted to run away, abandon everything and let the damned old woman take over the world, if that laughter had continued a little longer than it did. But she held back her sarcasm a while later, and she rested her parched hands on Reynod's shoulders.

"What some cannot do, others do in her place," she said, and she disappeared.

When she looked for a magical solution, the sorceress offered her an ordinary earthly solution instead. She felt hatred for his own helplessness, for the evil that afflicted him, and she cursed his life. She undressed and ran to the edge of a puddle, where a small waterfall fell. She looked at herself in the reflection of the moonlit water, and loathed his body, the flaccid flesh and bones that were his person. She squeezed her sex with her hands, trying to force him to satisfy his desires, but she only managed to hurt herself.

She could have nothing more than that despicable conformation. But his mind remained intact. Stronger than the rest, his head replaced the flaws in his form. She knelt down and began hitting her chest with her fists, the sides of her back, her narrow pelvis, her sex useless, her legs weak. She scratched herself with her nails and whipped her back with branches of thorny plants. Then he took his head in his hands, and compressed it as much as he could, trying to concentrate the whole story of his life, which was ultimately the experience of the world, in his memory. The pain that her father had caused her as punishment had given her strength. Pain creates things like that just as it breeds men. Wars and deaths are born from resentment. She could find the history of the world in her own childhood, on that distant day with her father on the banks of a river that carried away the victims of the plague.

She then knew what he should do. But she would not ask that favor of her friend Zor de her, but of another.

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They found Zor on his back and with his arms crossed on the ground. The branches formed fields of different levels around Zor. His body inhabited a small shadowless gap between the leaves. They jumped over the branches until they reached him.

"Alive but useless, he can't move," said Reynod. Zor only shook his fingers and toes. He raised his head a little and looked at them. He said something but his mouth was numb, full of saliva, and he could hardly be understood. He spat at their feet and they put dirt in his mouth.

"Killing him will be very easy," said Markus. "I will do it, as I always do your job..." When he raised the ax over Zor's neck, a figure appeared behind him, and the witcher screamed.

It was the image of him. The exact reflection of him, but with whiter skin and a smile he didn't remember having had. Many times he had seen that other person who did the opposite of him. The eternal discomfort that made him doubt all of his actions, always.

The figure moved towards Zor, walking among the partridges that watched him, emitting his guttural song, like a gasp from the grass.

The smile then seemed to disperse into the air, giving the plants a windless tremor. The animals began to run. Sometimes nothing more than the shaking of branches was seen, but then they were seen passing across the clearing over the trunks and leaves that covered Zor. Everyone seemed to be fleeing from the threat of an imminent storm.

But this time they perceived the scent of the Other.

-No!- he shouted, but he was not addressing Markus, who had turned to look at him, with his arms lowered and without resistance, but rather at the other who was walking towards him and threatening to touch him. He saw Zor stealing the ax from his hands with a movement that was typical of the past, of the legends of ancient hunts told when night fell. Even the handle of the ax had molded itself to the hunter's weak fist, and the weapon sliced into Markus's foot. His face was torn with pain, and she writhed on the ground, clutching her leg against his body.

But Reynod only noticed that the intruder had disappeared, and he felt free again.

The forest returned to its usual serene placidity, to the common sounds of the evening. But he was afraid to see him again if he stayed. He didn't know how to scare him away, or what the Other could be planning in the dark part of the world, the intangible zone from which he came to torment him.

That's why he ran away and left them alone.

Zor still had the ax in his hand, but he had gone numb again. Markus had put a branch between his teeth and was holding it tightly. His foot looked like a bag of leaves crushed to the ground, a large red stain littering the foliage. The blood sank into the earth as it flowed, until at last it stopped, and became dark as it dried.

"Big white doll, we thought you were so honorable..." Zor said, lamenting, but Markus wasn't paying attention to him and was muttering something with his face contorted. But Zor never knew if the meaning of those broken moans was a prayer or a curse.

The smell of blood was dispersed in the musty air by the stillness of dusk, a fickle space of time between the bright afternoon and the night that began to move, quietly, in the twinkling of fireflies and the eyes of owls. He traveled with the light that was lost in the birth of blackness between the trunks, the harsh darkness of the air cooling on the banks of the river. He swam with the current until he found in the region the great cats that were waiting for the night as for a beneficent sky, hidden in the grass, crouching, with their eyelids barely open to hide the brightness of their eyes, looking at

the moon and waiting for it to come. erase the contours with shadows and diffuse lines, until making the world an environment suitable for fear.

The smell attracted the gray-spotted animal that was now approaching them.

Zor had noticed the smell of sweat from the fur a little earlier. He was going to warn Markus, but something stopped him. The weakness of the aching body, perhaps, the painful gloom of numbness, the desire to finish off the enemy and survive.

The wildcat looked first at Zor, as if thus ensuring his indifference. Then to Markus, who clumsily backed away, resting one hand after the other on the soft earth, crawling with his eyes fixed on the beast.

"Don't move," Zor said, but his voice was only a whisper.

They heard footsteps on the ivy. The animal was a hunter like them. The claws extended and peeked through the fur of the paws. Fangs glistened as he opened his mouth. The thick, mottled hairs on his back stood up all the way to his tail. The long gray mustaches had tightened and trembled.

She then lunged at Markus and bit his foot. Markus screamed as he tried to back away, but the animal sunk its teeth deeper into him. He then shook the prey, tearing the bones and flesh still attached to the rest of the leg. And he escaped with pieces of meat in his mouth to get lost in the thicket.

A stream of blood bubbled from his leg, forming a dark red mass on the stump. Markus's long white hair mixed in the grass, but lost consciousness after the pain.

Zor thought he could still hear the cat's footsteps and the crunching of bone between its fangs, even when he was already far away. He needed to get up and get to the edge of the forest for help. He began to crawl following the guidance of the stars among the trees, the shadows of the trunks. The night and the animals were now less dangerous to him than men.

For three days he crawled forward. He rested at night and drank from the frost and the night dew. He realized that his limbs were gaining strength, but not enough to stand upright. He felt tingling in his fingers. He lay his sore back on the cool leaves. His bones ached every time he turned around. He knew that it was necessary to get away from the forest if he did not want Reynod's hunters to come looking for him.

He was able to crawl to the last tree before the peat fields reached by the cold winds of the distant northern coast. There were almost no bushes there and the sparse grass grew in short, thin, hard strands. He stayed lying

down, he didn't have the strength to continue. He looked at the desolate landscape, at the beetles passing around him, and finally fell asleep.

When he woke up, he felt hungry. He tried to get up, but he was only able to turn around with more ease than he expected. The pain was also greater.

I have the body of a spider.

He thought about Markus, that he must continue bleeding to death in the forest.

I have the spirit of a spider.

He then licked the dew from the ground, the few drops that seemed to him like waves of fresh water.

He never knew how many suns passed over him. He changed position from time to time to avoid getting burned, but he no longer found a way to cover himself. He regretted having left the trees, but he no longer had the strength to return.

He sinks into the morning mist on the grasslands west of the Droinne. The bison graze, the bison advance, raising the dust that surrounds them.

The men hide behind the last row of fir trees before the meadow, and watch the beasts, which have their heads bent and chew the cud with birds on their backs. The men leave in groups and reach the great clearing, they run and spread out like a wide, slow river. They come smeared with mud to hide their smell. The newly sharpened spears in their arms raised, shining in the sunlight that disperses the mist.

“Suns from those days!” he remembers. “The times of abundant hunting, the beautiful beasts whose flesh is opened with the edge of knives, will no longer return. The meat that satisfies the hunger of children and women, our own hunger for strength, for blood staining our hands as a sign of meekness.

“The mass of dead muscles collapsing into the dirt swirled by hooves, the body defeated.

“The screams around the fallen noble heads, the singing and dancing, and then the rite of the first cut given to the oldest. Feeling the warm vapor of the insides, shaking us with a chill in the midst of the blush of the sun, still too young to understand slowness or softness.

“The sultry summer sun illuminating the crest of our might on the prairies.”

He thought he was still dreaming when he saw a group walking at a slow pace, not far from where he was. He tried to call out to them but his throat was dry and he was unable to utter more than a whimper.

The procession was advancing and he was moving away. Then he threw some stones at the crows that had been hovering around him for days before and that were now waiting for him perched on the ground. The birds flapped their wings and fled, the men passing by turned around. They were dressed in black and had their faces covered by funeral masks. Oval black spots on the lips and eyes, the circles of death around the manifestations of life. They were carrying a body wrapped in a simple cloth shroud; the dead man must have been an execrate of the town.

They had stopped and were pointing at him. A man broke away from the others and began walking towards him. When he was next to him, he covered him with his shadow. Zor could barely make out the features, but he thought he recognized him even though he couldn't think clearly.

-Zor! "They told us that he had died!" said the stranger.

Zor wanted to speak, but he coughed. The other gave him a drink from a bag attached to his belt, and waited for him to take several swallows.

"I'm almost there," Zor said, more relieved after spitting out water and blood. "Markus is back there, maybe he's still alive." But before continuing with your funeral, give me more water or I will also accompany your dead. Who was he, may I know?

The other helped him raise his head, but he did not answer.

-Did you not hear me?

-This courtship is for your wife. The Witcher suspended the festivals, cursed your entire family and ordered them to be killed. If they find out that we saved her body from the bonfire, they will burn us. Zor looked at him carefully again, and remembered that this man was the son of the spear craftsman, one of the few whose families had dared to cross Reynod. But this didn't matter anymore. Zor's eyes turned from one side of the plain to the other, looking at the desolate field, at the sky broken by celestial lines between the gray clouds, at the procession and the faces in the distance, peeking through the dust like black dots, clumps of earth raised from the mud. He looked at the shroud and guessed the shapes of the body. He felt lost. His feet stepped on the void more than when falling from the tree, more than in the insensitivity of the broken body. He knew that he would soon lose his mind if he didn't get up.

He made an effort to straighten his back. But after trying many times he gave up, and he found no alternative but to scream.

The scream, more an exhaled cry than a scream, more a moan than the cry of fury, filled the entire expanse of the peat field. He spread across the cloudy sky toward the cold surface of the coast and sea far beyond.

Because the wind was the messenger, the wandering traveler in charge of the disconsolate laments.

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A red mass of intense brilliance came down the slopes like a great tongue in the middle of the gray world, like an early twilight and abrupt night without stars or moon. But it was the moon that was coming down from the mountain.

The moon-colored lava fell slowly, destroying trees and people. The screams caused panic among those watching from the beach. Reynod stayed there for a long time, rejecting the calls of his subjects, who pulled at his cloak to force him to flee. On the opposite bank, the desperate gestures of men and women began to be seen fleeing from the mountain that followed them with the slowness of a monster with feet of fire. Those who reached the shore threw themselves into the river, the smell of burned bodies rising from the surface of the water.

The lava continued to descend with its mouth made of flames, and when it finally reached the waters, a dense reddish vapor darkened the air even more. A new layer of gray clouds had formed and were descending in slow, heavy masses of vapor. The lava displaced the river from its channel, the waves rose first thick, then higher, one after the other, pushing themselves further and further away, until creating a mountain of water that not only flooded the adjacent beaches, but the entire land of the gorges to beyond the rocky grooves, among the first trees of the forests on both coasts.

The witcher and his people had fled towards the promontories above those same furrows that were flooding. He had made the right decision, he thought as he saw the waters coming, to send his children away and shelter the people somewhere as high as possible. He knew that the volcano was not going to be satisfied with destroying only its contours. The hands of the mountain god would extend to destroy the town that harbored the disobedient.

The smoke came in thick puffs. The most trusted men took cover next to Reynod, who had stood with his arms raised invoking divine mercy, as if with that single gesture he could dominate the forces of nature. Then he made a circle with his arms and looked up at the sky. The others imitated him, even when the water had already risen and began to surround the bases of the trunks. They trembled as they prayed, while their knees sank.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "With me you will be safe."

The river ran alongside the gorge. Only when night came it had calmed down and formed a new bed. Finally the water began to recede. Many looked out from the promontories, leaning on the fallen trunks to observe the new channel that moved slowly, dark, with large smoky, red circles like mushrooms surrounding the corpses that floated by.

The children woke up hungry and the men went to look for the goats that had escaped. They returned dragging those who were dead by their horns, and they cooked them in the fire. The women milked the rest.

Reynod walked among his people. He didn't seem tired, he didn't even agree to feed until the others did first. He looked out from the rocks above the new river, and thought he saw in the fog, between the trunks standing like green stems on the already calm surface of the water, a pale twilight of its own will.

silhouettes unscathed by destruction, as if they came from another place never altered. visitors amazed at the landscape of which they did not believe they were the cause,

They, the innocent daughters of the unexplained, of the imperishable, like the substance of bones or the origin of worms and blood, born from the souls of men, cause and end of acts, equal to shadows entering bodies. to commit the most atrocious designs in the name of others

they spoke to him in a language that he did not know, that he understood little by little, a strange dialect with a familiar cadence, with primitive tones of childhood, he listened carefully to his story: they were talking to him about the dead,

"They are waiting for us, father not father," they said. "The gods are waiting, they have called us for a long time."

the daughters were wrong, their young spirits saw what they were not in the shadows of the gods, and he had to make them see the error, the punishment of Zor's family was the punishment of the gods on the people, he would untie the knots in the throat of the gods, it would be their voice, the wind and the water to sweep away the blood trapped in the mouths of the creators,

He would make them say their names, which he never knew,

The daughters were going to die to atone for the honor of the people, to erase the doubts that others created in their minds, virgins for the bodies of the gods, the fire of those bodies transformed into ashes creating seeds, pollen scattered by the winds.

Reynod turned his back on the volcano and ordered:

-Prepare the sacrificial altars, and bring my daughters!

But he was not going to part with the three men just yet. If he had kept them isolated and unreachable, so much so that no one other than two guards and two old women had access to them, it was not to lose them so soon. Only when he was too old and his enemies were finished with him, would the sons come out like bright stars to rule with the strength of a wild cat one, the cunning of a fox the other, and the delicacy of a leaf the third. To complement each other and give each other advice, to take turns in the task of procreating with his sisters and to continue the purity of intelligence and the porosity of those eyes capable of perceiving the substance of the gods.

Like him, even if they were not children of his flesh, that did not matter.

One of the children had once asked him:

-Father, how will I know if it is a god who speaks to me?

-You will know because your senses are going to decide. The less you think, the greater the field of your perception.

Then they lay down, covered by the bear skins that their men had hunted, and that the women sewed especially for the children. He left them sleeping with the wind blowing their long hair, and Reynod looked up at the moon, which seemed to be looking at him, and speaking to him. He closed his eyes to that white light that was watching him. He covered his ears to the wind that swept the surface of the river, to the murmur of the water, to the slow and exasperating voice of his memory, with that plaintive tone of a worried mother.

The men began to build the altar. They used the logs carried by the flood, also the rafts that had run aground and hung with bats on the edges of the rocks. Hammering and blows were heard for five nights and days. Hits of the axes on the trunks, and the hum of the voices that prayed accompanying those who worked.

The smell of spices burned by the sorcerer's assistants in front of the dead ran along the beaches of lava, which was slowly cooling.

At the end of the sixth day, the altars were ready. A few men were still busy laying firewood around the trunks of twisted knots and aborted shoots, standing in a vast field of loam.

Reynod began to walk between the logs. He contemplated, with pride, the beauty of the construction.

When the volcano had died down and the fog had disappeared, he heard the chant of his hunters from the forests, beyond the sandstone piles.

And among the branches of the beech trees hurt by the hot air and the ash of all those days, the men appeared carrying their spears high, waving them in a sign of victory.

The broken tips with edges like teeth swung carrying Sulla's body, torn and red, all four limbs impaled on four spears. Swarms of flies had settled on the corpse. But the meat shone like the sun in the last days of summer.

"Where is Zor's grandson?" he asked.

The men looked at each other fearfully as they saw the witcher's fury. Reynod heaved a deep sigh of regret, now certain that nothing would ever be enough to end the memory.

-You too will be delivered to the Gods!

The paint on Reynod's face had become deformed. It was no longer a cold imperturbable mask, but the grimace of something that twisted his spirit.

The virgins were tied to the stakes. Some were dark-skinned, but others had a light hue that showed off the veins in their necks. They all had long, straight hair that moved over their white robes. They walked with their heads down along the path opened between the rows of guards. From time to time they looked up at the men. They were of similar ages to Sulla's when he died, Reynod told himself, but they looked like girls encased in women's bodies. Its slim shapes accentuated the small Enlargement of the breasts and hair on the pelvis. Only one of them was crying, but in silence, because the sorcerer had spoken to them about the need for the rite, about the privileged luck of being chosen for the satisfaction of the gods. The Creators love with special devotion those who sacrifice themselves for Them, he had taught them.

That's why they went up safely, despite their fear, and looked sadly at those who remained at the foot of the altar. They knew that the people looked at them as if they were not human, but beings with a stain of blood on their backs.

They had been born among the fire that killed their mothers, and that is how they would die. Fire was their lineage and the volcano had come to look for them. Reynod had prepared them for death. That's how wise the gods were. The world they knew no longer existed in that place where the only birds flew over the unburied bodies.

The only comfort was the figure of the Great Father there ahead, with his arms raised as he prayed. His long gray hair falling over his shoulders, his broad chest under the ceremonial tunic woven from reed fibers and sewn with sheep's thread. The large leaves printed on the fabric plunged

and led the gaze into the depths of a dark forest, where the animals smelled of the dead.

Then the sorcerer began the ceremony, singing sad music with his wooden cornet.

They had not forgotten the legend that he told them when they were little. He came to visit them surrounded by his entourage, covered in furs in winter, bare-chested in spring, during the long hunting seasons. When he finished settling on the blankets that his assistants spread on the grass, they surrounded him in silence, barely containing their fear of the witcher's always unpredictable mood.

-For a long time you have admired this instrument...- he told them.- There is a tree in the distant region of the West, far beyond the river, where the birds with the most beautiful song nest. I have heard the orders of the Gods in their trills.

When he began to play, the rest of the sounds of the world disappeared. The forest transformed for them into a place of clear beauty. Flocks passed by where he played, insects landed on the girls' shoulders, and the light entering the forest seemed to form an aura around Reynod's head. The women who were caring for the girls shuddered and fell to their knees. The young women looked, saw the red spots on Reynod's face, and then they looked at their hands.

The sorcerer was another man at that moment, perhaps not even one in reality, but several men incarnated in the figure of that sound, a figure suspended in the green air, covered with drops of dew, the sweat of animals and the snow of the sky. winter. Something indefinite hanging in the sky, dragged by the wind gods.

Then the witcher opened his eyes, got up and left. The rigid expression of authority returned to his face, the hardness of the investiture over the softness of his face.

Reynod thought he heard a man's scream, a familiar voice carried by the wind. But his tone of regret was very distant, and implausible, as if he had crossed time or survived his own decay and death in the face of the weight of distance, and he attributed it to his usual voices.

He returned his attention to the decision of which ones would die or be preserved for his descendants.

You, on high, why are you not with me today! Why do they let my mask and my face be different, that the eyes feel sorrow and the lips a fury translated into judgmental doom?

How will I choose them for life or death, with what ideas or thoughts of a probable or improbable future. She does... the other doesn't... the youngest

has a long time of fertility for my children to procreate... the oldest will no longer be useful to me.

I remember when she was born. So much time, and so much ice and snow and dead people have passed, covering the thin layer of pity when seeing her defenseless body in the hands of the old woman who was carrying her, and the arms of the mother that came forward with the powerful gesture of longing. , without being able to touch it. That was the last time I made that mistake. Afterwards, I blindfolded the mothers, covered her ears, and took them to the bonfire.

Choose.

They walk together towards the fire, but forever separated from each other, irreconcilable daughters of my torrid soul.

When he finished his election, there were two groups: one by the altar, waiting. The other was walking towards the wood.

He took out the stiletto. The brightness rose with the sublimated reflection of the sun between the clouds, a sparkle that made everyone cover their faces with their arms. Then he approached the first of the men and made a deep cut on the right side of the neck. Blood poured out as the man screamed and the cut continued to the other side. A wide, neat, bubble furrow had formed before by the air exhaled through the second mouth of new lips.

She repeated the same process with each of them. His ceremonial clothing had been marked by large red stains, the warmth of the blood making him think of the corpses he had opened in recent years. The distribution of the organs, the almost transparent fibers and membranes

the hands, the muscles that move them, the ribs soft like reed wood, the heart without sound, a dead crow in the hollow of the thorax, the snakes of the entrails, the bones of the legs and their strength, their noble sensation from the distance, and up there the mass of brains, so strange, futile in appearance, so impenetrable and mute, that they provoke the desire to crush them to punish their silence.

He threw the stiletto aside, and raising his right hand again, he sounded the bugle with a call of extreme vivacity. The blood slid down his arm until it reached his shoulder and joined the rest of the stains on his body.

The sounds merged with each other through his echoes, becoming a low song of lacerating tones.

And they lit the bonfires at the same pace.

It was opaque music against the ocher background of the sky. Gray and black clouds merged into each other and began to descend on the town.

The sky was falling on the earth.

The world was transformed into a narrow, closed, airless hut, where the smoke drowned those who cried.

The flames finished enveloping the bodies of the virgins. Fear appeared on his face for an instant, but it disappeared before Reynod's hard gaze. The flames licked her legs and her sex. The smoke from the bonfires turned black, and the columns melted into a great mass that could have competed with the remains of the volcano. The fire grew stronger. The crackling of the wood surpassed the suppressed screams of the virgins.

The body creaks as it dies. We are wood of the world, matter that the spirit cannot fully control.

The noise and the smell.

The aroma of meat has always attracted me. But time cancels out my sense of smell just as it closes my eyes, which look without blinking, dry like small dates without flavor. The eyebrows were raised, the sweat on the forehead running like summer rain. A sweat that my beard will take care of drying.

The old women covered their mouths, but it was necessary for their prayer to continue, firm and incessant. The men who were stoking the fire had used up the branches and were throwing down new ones that they brought from the nearest trees. Green branches, which were slow to consume and exuded a smell of fresh grass mixed with the flesh of the virgins.

They are taking the shape of trees

The smoke had begun to dry them out, making them part of the vegetation of the world.

The crackling of bones is the sound of music that comes from the earth, a rattling of jaws, of teeth and fangs, of scabs that fall apart.

the breaking of hair, of twitching fingers, twisted to catch the air, the breaking of nails like legless beetles

The bonfires screamed, the fire had the voices of women. A sound that mixed the prayers of history, the lightning confused with words of cruelty and the thunder molded with the elements of the sky. Voices rising and fleeing from the dust, from the flesh and the last and liberating fire that had conceived them

of the faces that grimace with black smiles

small volcanoes burning in search of the sky, stairs of ethereal spiral substance, in combat with the loneliness of the heights, with the leaves that fly in the chest of the wind

If I could not see those shadows that rise without mercy from those who remain, I would endure everything watching the consummation of the fire and the brightness of the flames extinguishing in the night until the next morning, but the aroma of the dead enters the memory, digs into the places of pain and rescues pieces of the flesh of the past

the inextinguishable smell, the lasting smell like souls, the smell of corpses. KNOWLEDGE JOURNEYS

Long before reaching the town of the North, when he still had his fists clenched on the spear with his father's blood, the witcher's men had come to look for them.

"He's not yours anymore!" He shouted a moment after lifting Zor's body and throwing it into the flames. He saw the trees collapse on top of the old man, and only then did he turn to scream. But not to get rid of the arms that wanted to tie him, but to calm the pain marked in his hands. Tol's cry was not directed at the men loyal to Reynod, but at the trees and animals that had survived, at the voices that came from the shore of the petrified river, the moans of virgin women who died at the stake.

They tied his hands and feet and wrapped him in a hunting net hanging from a branch over the shoulders of six men. But more than the weight, it was his incessant movements that slowed the passage between the places devastated by the fire. Tol saw the flames slowly dying out, while the smoke dried his throat and the smell of the corpses grew.

The hunters whipped him, but the blows seemed to energize his anger as he screamed with his lips pressed against the net.

Father's soul travels with me.

He saw him on the sides of the road, he appeared and disappeared among the foliage, his face peeked out between the bodies of the men. It was also in his hands, Zor's soul lived in them, hurt, hard, still rigidly closed as if they were still holding the spear. The spirit's face was benevolent, and that was what hurt him the most. If he had seen at least a reproachful bias, remorse would have made some sense to him. But feeling the guilt without reward - the atonement, because it was his father's, was given in advance, and there was nothing greater to obtain - made him finally shut up. All effort and thought, even grief, was useless.

Then a group of men appeared from the side of the road. He did not recognize the black painted faces, the two wide gray lines that ran down the cheeks to join at the mouth, nor did he at first see the other line crossing the forehead. Three lines and three points that the rebels had adopted as a challenge to the witcher.

The rebels attacked the first hunters in the caravan. The net holding Tol fell to the ground. He felt his back hurt and could not move, but he managed to contemplate the shine of the spears falling around him, the blood that flowed among the ash dust, the daggers and axes that cut off the heads of the faithful. An old man in a gray robe emerged from the trees and ordered the heads to be buried next to the bodies. Then the warriors obeyed and lifted the remains that shone in their hands with the faint reflection of

the sun between the branches. The old man approached Tol slowly. His face was thin and wrinkled, long white locks fell on cheeks full of freckles from old age. He pulled out a dagger from under his clothes and cut the ropes.

Tol freed himself, but could not get up yet due to the pain in his back. The old man's lips smiled. It had been a long time since he had seen a man's smile, Tol told himself. He didn't even remember, actually, having ever seen his father laugh. But upon hearing the old man speak, the monotonous nuances of the voice made the rest of the world disappear for an instant and the past events were nothing more than the routine changes that the gods designate in the lives of men, even more fleeting than a Dew Drop.

"I rescued your father once so long ago that I no longer remember..." the old man said, while helping him raise his head and giving him a drink. "Don't worry, we're going to get you out of simulating your funeral."

"What should I do?" Tol asked, and his face looked like that of a child. "My father's weight is beating me."

-Your father would never sit on your back.

Tol wanted to know about his family. He obtained the certainty of Sulla's death and the disappearance of her children. When he began to grow sleepy from the drink the old man had given him, they laid him down on a fur blanket and treated his wounds. He let himself go, but he dreamed of the face of the one he had sacrificed.

Tol did not remember how he had gotten to the ship the rebels had left him on. He was still too stunned by the memory of his father's death. Lying on the deck, he thought he saw Zor's face in the sky. At first he couldn't move because of his injuries, but he felt like that image was crushing him. No one from the crew tried to get him out of there either. They had abandoned him like any other vagabond, and passed by almost without looking at him.

On the third day, he rubbed the languor of sleep off his face, and he had to lean on the railing when he got up. Then he saw the expanse of water and sky, and he felt his heart stir like a forehead. e to a vacuum. He realized that the men were watching him, sighed deeply and remained standing. But wherever I looked, there was nothing but a clear surface reflecting the sun and clouds in shades of blue and green, like bushes in a liquid meadow. Far away, where blue and green merged at the end of the world, the sea was a fallen sky. That was his vertigo, he thought, the confusing idea of being nothing in a world that slowly seemed to dissolve.

The shape of the ship reminded him of a reed leaf folded in two, battered by the waves on the sides. The oars propelled him like the light

shell of a fruit. The wind blew the foam on the deck, and the wood was penetrated with shells. The salt was sticking to his hands and arms, he felt the taste of salt on his beard and sun-weary skin.

He saw another ship pass them, but then the loneliness became complete. With each passing day it was said that there would be no more land in the world. Everywhere he could see nothing but water. But he did not know the language of men, and he thought that asking was the same as showing himself inferior. He did not know why the rebels had trusted them, if he had always heard that they feared strangers more than Reynod's tyranny. Until then I had only heard rumors that far to the north came men from distant lands who for some reason did not advance south, as if behind the Lost Mountains there were no lands worth exploring, or there were only savages with whom it was not worth it. worth trading. Then Tol thought about the rebels' cautious maneuvers to get him to the ship, and perhaps they had given someone else the task of carrying him all that distance to the coast. The rebels were disorganized men, almost like disobedient children still, who carried in their souls the fear that Reynod had taught them of everything strange.

Sometimes, he stopped to observe the men with light skin and blonde hair while he carried out the jobs assigned to him. He saw them gathered around graphics drawn on thick, very smooth leather. Colors and figures brushed with short beaver hairs and oily ink, which spoke to him of a great and unknown world. He then considered himself less than one of the beasts he used to hunt in the forests. His old lost spear had been an ancient and cruel instrument, compared to that delicate fragility of brushes.

The advanced ones, as he had decided to call them, studied the diagrams spread on large boards in the bow, drawing signs with the slow movement of their thin hands, giving directions to each other, or pointing to something lost in the distance, an island, a country. distant perhaps. They noticed Tol's restless look, smiled complacently and urged him to come closer. But he did not dare to speak to them either, he was afraid of offending them, perhaps they would get tired of him and throw him into the sea.

But they began to teach him words of his language, took him out of rowing work, and trained him for deck duties. And one day he stepped on the steps that led to the bow, while the mid-afternoon sun rested on his shoulders.

The faces of the crew were weathered, with no signs of abuse or signs of struggle. Tol felt old, hurt and dirty in front of them, like a rescued animal that deserved nothing but pity.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

They laughed, but surrounded him, patting him approvingly. Since then he learned to fish in the sea, but above all he wanted to train himself in the

art of commerce. His attempts in the first ports were failures. He ended up fighting with merchants with bulging bellies, thick arms, and heads covered by fox fur caps. He made gestures of disagreement or consent when he did not understand the dialect, trying to make himself understood among the bustle of those who went to the coast in search of provisions. He would bump a fist against his other open hand if he did not agree with the barter, then several men would appear at an order from the merchant who wanted to deceive him. They surrounded him and pushed him towards the center of the circle. People gathered around to watch those fights that filled the long summer days. The children jumped and laughed, the women gesticulated, and the men joined in the fight. Tol's companions ran to help him.

And it was almost night when spirits had finally calmed down, and they returned to the ship with provisions loaded on carts, making their way among those returning to their homes inland.

The sun was hiding behind the sea with the color of a wound.

*

The day he arrived at the Northern Village for the first time, he gazed in amazement at the facades of the cabins, their chiseled wooden ceilings, the walls with mud bricks baked in ovens whose fires had not yet died. at night. The smoke that came from them was white, and the flames heated the ground where the children were going to take shelter. The carts passed one after another since before dawn, pulled by reindeer with severed antlers, entering and leaving the town through the sandstone streets.

Tol walked through the lost town amid the bustle of strange words from those who pushed him as he passed. Some stopped to observe with curiosity the color of his skin darkened by the trip. Those white people with light eyes seemed strange to him. They reminded him of the only man he had ever known with such qualities, his father's old neighbor named Markus, a staggering figure among the trees on his land. He had hoped to find a place to stay and live. He was tired of sailing without setting foot on land for more than two days in a row.

He wandered the streets until he felt tired, and decided to return to the ship. In that town nothing was recognizable to him, no one even understood him when he tried to get a little food in exchange for work. Everything he had learned had been useless to him, people turned away from him, afraid of his dark face with thick beard and long hair.

He walked along the coast looking at the late afternoon sky. The waves brought him the memory of what he had lost. He only had to return to the sea in the ship that had brought him, or throw himself off the cliffs. Dead or

alive, the sea would accept him, without a doubt. The water gods, the same ones who wrecked ships and flooded towns, were going to decide for him. But when he returned to the port, the ship had sailed and was moving away in the fog. Angry with himself for his indecision, he continued walking along the shore increasingly sad, offering his job as a fisherman for some food.

An old man, who was cleaning fish entrails on some stones, looked up when he felt Tol's shuffling step.

"Where do you come from, foreigner?" He asked him in the same dialect as the men on the ship.

Tol took some time to respond. His throat was dry from the cold.

-From the place you call the South. I came on that ship that now abandons me.

The fisherman looked curiously at the burns on Tol's chest.

-Are you escaping the war, foreigner?

-No, from the fury of the gods. Of the great mountain of fire that exploded on the other side of the sea.

Perhaps the fisherman took pity on him when he saw him sitting there with his gaze lost in the water, or it was the only way he found to give his presence some use, and proposed to feed him in exchange for helping him lift the nets in the mornings. . His son had died shortly before and he was without anyone to relieve him of so much work.

When Tol did not respond, the old man scratched his beard thoughtfully. Then, with a sullen expression, he began to look at him from head to toe.

"I'll give you a place to sleep, too," he said.

From that afternoon, Tol was his assistant. He learned to weave nets and fish with them. By the end of winter, the fisherman decided to leave him alone in charge of the harvest. As a sign of trust he gave her a knife to start his own work. Tol tried the filo on the fish. His hands moved as if that task had been his lifelong work. The old man had noticed the strength of his arms and back when he saw him working in the sea, but in the agile fingers that glistened with scales, the knife stopped being just a weapon and became an extension of his hands. .

-Now it's yours. It seems like it was made to wait for you.

Tol wanted to thank him, and told him about what he had planned since he was guarding the bison herds northeast of the village. He spent his free time exploring inland, and thus he had discovered a way to use the leather of those animals to preserve meat. The beasts did not migrate north, and

the inhabitants of the highlands envied the abundance of that meat in the village.

"They are savages," the old man had told him. "They come fleeing from wars in other towns, they distrust everyone." They hide and hide in the snow, but they don't know how to survive.

Tol had begun to think about how to find another use for the herds besides their meat. One day he began to cut the leather and pierce the body to the entrails, then wrapped a fragment of meat with a healthy piece of the same skin. Six days later, it was still as fresh as the first day. He let ninety nights pass, and the meat was still fresh.

Tol then set about building a new spear. The starry sky made him remember other times and other places. The morning he was ready, he went hunting, alone.

He defeated one beast at a time, calmly and without anxiety, knowing that it would never be like before, in the times of his father, and that is why his heart did not stir with the recovered profession. He hunted with difference as the animals ran and the herd dispersed as he went after them throwing his spear. Two days later, he returned to the town covered in blood and with a broken spear. The stone point was broken, but Tol had covered it with tufts of the testuces. They saw him cross the streets dragging seven bison skins, almost whole and still with traces of muscle and fat glistening in the sun.

The old fisherman made his way through the rest, and made him rest for the rest of the day. He told of Tol's discovery while he was sleeping, and many men came to offer to help them. All that season Tol and the old man prepared the hides and meat that the hunters brought back after chasing the herds to the west or south.

From the distant towns on the banks of the frozen rivers of the north, people came attracted by the rumor of the discovery. Men and women came in sleighs looking for that meat that could be preserved for an entire winter.

Tol then began to build a larger cabin. He had left the task in the hands of his men and he took pleasure in getting up and building the walls with mud bricks and logs.

"You have learned more than I have in my entire life," the fisherman told him. "You should get a wife, now that you have stopped being a vagabond."

But Tol did not answer him.

It was one morning, while he was working on the roof of the cabin, that he saw an old man limping down the road. Tol put a hand on his forehead to protect himself from the sun.

He was an old man with dirty and smelly clothes. Instead of shoes, he had rags tied to him, and he was missing one foot.

"Give me something to eat," begged the old man with a musty, rough and worn voice, extending a hand full of blisters.

"No, get out of here!" said Tol.

When the other was already leaving, he remembered something, an image or a long-lost voice. Or perhaps it was what they called intuition, a command from the world of dreams. Something unexpected that came to his memory from the frozen clouds in the sky covering the village, from the reflection of the snow on the wood of his new home.

He turned and called to the old man.

-Wait! -He shouted.- What is his name?

The old man seemed to be hesitant. A nauseating smell filled the air around him.

-Come on, if you don't want me to throw it into the water to wash off that dirt! -And he came down from the roof with a threatening gesture.

But at the same moment, the man, looking at him from the front, opened his eyes as wide as his eyelids would allow. A light and bright color came from them. He raised his arms in horror and began to scream. He took a step back, but only managed to trip over the movements of his clumsy legs, and fell to the ground.

Tol went to help him, but the old man refused and shouted again.

-Zor! He's chasing me here too!

-Don't worry, it's not my father you see, but his son.

But the other continued lamenting, kneeling and with his eyes full of tears. The dirt on his face had been erased a little and he showed fine skin almost as white as the skin of the natives of that village.

"What's his name?" Tol asked again.

-Markus- answered the old man, - I came to take refuge in this town that my ancestors abandoned.

Tol did not think of the ancient past, but of the immediate past. In his lost children. He approached the old man and held him by the ruined furs that sheltered him. He insisted that she tell him if he knew anything about them.

-I only saw one of your children, the oldest. I pray to the deities not to find it again.

-Where was he, where is he now?!

He-he fled the river after killing my son.

Tol stood up, serious and proud, and looked towards the path where he had seen the old man arrive, as if he had seen his son coming along the same path.

-He must have done something to deserve death. I taught mine to differentiate good from evil.

"Your family doesn't know that difference," Markus told him, his forehead suddenly wrinkled and tense, now hunger was less important than pride.

Tol was wary, but he had to help him recover. That memory was a treasure that he needed to open, food for his own memory that he sought the past with desperate anxiety.

Markus stayed with him throughout the construction of the ship on which Tol worked with fifty other men. He had observed that craft with admiration at first, and one day they came looking for him.

“We have seen you standing in front of the port for a long time, they told him, they told us about your hunts and your strength, we need you. So he agreed and abandoned the old fisherman. They said goodbye and the old man did not want to see him again, even though he had to meet him every day in the port area. Tol forgot it sooner than he would have liked.

The new trade that he was beginning to learn was delicate due to the superficial accuracy of the waterlines, almost a feat that the tables as assembled by keeping the weight of the boats afloat. An ephemeral art also due to the uncertainty of its life, the ships exposed to storms, to the monsters of the sea, to the treacherous undermining of the rats hidden in the holds. Sometimes he found insects gnawing on the wood, even though he himself had chosen the material from the strongest trees. Everyone was aware that he had come from the forests, and that gave him privileges.

"That's what the larvae were like in my father's sores," he told Markus one afternoon. "And they turned into worms, then the hunters came... and I had to do it."

The old man had remained in bed since his arrival, looking at Tol from there with his head resting on a pile of straw, and his arms on his chest. His white hair was like a fitting halo of old age.

Tol was kneeling, pounding seeds with a square, dark-handled mace on the ground. The flames barely illuminated the interior of the hut, but the night advanced outside.

"I want you to see my leg," the old man told him, pulling the stump out from under the blankets. - My son had to cut it many times so that the tiny ghosts did not invade my blood and heart.

Tol looked towards the bed. Even if he tried, he couldn't quite make out Markus's face, hidden in a corner of the cot.

-But no one but the beast that attacked you was to blame.

Then the old man straightened his body with the last strength he still had. The firelight swirled in his hair, and he began to speak this time without accepting interruption.

-I'm going to tell you something that your father should have told you. But it was very much his thing to hide, pride dominated him, and hence his defiance of Reynod's law.

Tol was still preparing the putty that he was going to put between the cracks in the ceiling the next morning. The sound of the mace on the resinous seeds served as a background to the sound of his voice. Markus spoke furiously. He heard him relate slowly and between throat clearings and coughs that hindered the sometimes uncertain thread of his narrative, what had happened in the forest.

-Memory does not always have an exact sense of time. "But from that moment on I regret having underestimated your father," he finished by saying.

Tol had let a word fall from his lips, almost without realizing it, as his attention left his work to look at Markus. He did not know how that word came to take on such enormous size in the sphere of his gaze.

It was a sound more than a word, born in the darkness barely dominated by the light of the fire, eager to escape from the hut and ascend to the night sky, where the whiteness of the ice still shone.

"Betrayal," he said, but he never knew if he actually said it out loud, or even if the old man had heard it.

But the word was clearly clear on his lips, and he seemed to have waited for that moment since the day he had been engendered in the mind of some distant ancestor, because never before did it seem so certain, so right, as in that moment. .

The word emerged mature, lethal.

Tol knew he was going to cry. No matter how much the old man was most responsible or completely blameless, there was something that Tol could never leave aside. The unbreakable truth that nothing would ever be the same again, that it was impossible to do what had not been done, to say what had not been said, to kill what should have died a long time before.

That thought burst into his body as if it came from the cold of the steppe, from the howl that the nearby wolves gave as a sign of tragic prophecy, from the night full of noises and waves hitting the cliffs. Suddenly, a tide of hostile discoveries arrived from the sea, from the land of intense heat that condensed in drops traveling over the waters, until forming that mountain of furious strength disguised as temperance. This was what his face should show. Serenity, holding back the tears that threatened to give him away, while the mace continued working on the seeds, in its hidden practice and wait for more honorable material.

And the old man continued talking.

"In your eyes I see the same hatred that I saw in your son's," said Markus' voice. "And in your father when he stayed to watch the animal devour me."

Tol stopped pounding.

With the mace in his hand rigid at the side of his body, hidden in the shadow of his clothing, he walked towards the old man.

He had his eyes wide open to make out it in the darkness of the corner.

He heard Markus's labored breathing, the movement of his lips opening and closing idly.

He heard the rats' footsteps under the cot.

The old man's smell, an aroma of secretions and unhealed wounds, rose from the blankets as if from a pit of rot, and gave more reason to his act.

"What's wrong?" He heard the old man ask.

But it wasn't important e the voice or tone with which the other spoke, not even if it came from those cut lips or from the walls that surrounded him, almost demanding an explanation of what he was going to do.

He did not answer. He wasn't going to let air block his path, nor let time, even if it lasted a blink, deter him.

When he was as close to the other as the length of his outstretched arm holding the handle of the mace, the old man's eyes looked at him, very clearly wide and hopeless.

"Don't be sorry," he was telling her now. Tol perhaps had in his expression, without realizing it, a deep and very profound twinkle of regret or mercy. -If the son killed the son, why doesn't the father go and kill the father.

Markus didn't close his eyes when he finished speaking, but he did. He did not dare to sink deeper into the old man's gaze, which had begun to capture him even before he raised the mace.

the circles of his eyes become deep. They are two silent tunnels that join together in a single bottomless pit. I'm falling, not knowing if I'll ever stop. But the world lights up like the water of a stream on a bright day. The green of the trees crushes me with the weight of the sky, the rays burn my naked back. I turn around. Two gray birds dart by, flapping their wings in my face. The smell of their dirty feathers stuns me. Two black circles descend from the sky, two columns that stop in my eyes. Lying on the ground, I let myself be blinded by the sun

which fell on the old man's head. Twice, three, four, and then as many times as were enough to soften the bones.

and not a single thought could survive,

not a memory worth remaining,

a mind not worthy of memory.

And a cold gust came through the openings between the boards and carried away the smell of old age, as if it had never been there.

*

One night before the day when the tournaments would finally lead him to the final game, Tol opened his eyes and looked at the still dark northern sky. The night lights, the brilliant waves of white, yellow and red lights swirled like tides of blood.

He sat in the frost and lichen that grew between the cracks, but the ice no longer gave him chills. His skin had adapted to the climate. Sometimes she liked to wake up and stretch until his numb muscles gained strength. Then he went out to face the sharp wind that hit his face. Some birds with white feathers and black spots around their eyes appeared from underground nests to look for food on the beach.

From being a hunter in the woods, he had had to mold himself to that void of air and earth. Even though the wind never stopped and shaped things and men, it was always slower and weaker than the sea; and the land receded every afternoon in front of the sea that spread its tongues of foam between the cliffs. Tol was forced to always hear that sound that came from beyond the clay beaches on high cliffs: the roar of the waves hitting the granite walls. From that abyss above the water, between the stones and the sand deltas of the beaches came the voices of Sulla and Sigur.

Tol offered a feast to his neighbors that night. They had sat next to some bushes bent by the wind. Each of his friends drank in his honor and triumph the old musk fermented for five summers. They shouted and drank

until dawn. Then they hugged him and said goodbye. Only the town priest remained. Then the northern lights appeared.

The night he first saw them, he had believed that the sky was going to collapse, or that the gods were fighting with fists of suns. But then astonishment turned into curiosity. These phenomena occurred before dawn and after strange storms without rain. The wind was intense and stopped from one moment to the next, leaving a feeling of emptiness more suffocating than its force. Even the natives couldn't stand it sometimes, the priest had told him. Many threw themselves off the cliffs, mad with fear and staring into the abyss, just before the sun began to rise over the beaches.

The pain of the wind, men called that phenomenon every autumn. People locked themselves in their cabins, the men asked their women to tie them up so they wouldn't flee from that void of wind.

-How to fill the gap in the sky after the storm, endure the heat that is not heat, but longing for the constant scourge on broken skin?

The priest recited that litany in Tol's hut. He was short in stature and had broad shoulders, a thick beard, and dark hair that covered the backs of his hands. He was dressed in the skin of a white bear, and wore a crown-shaped cap, with the black and white feathers of eagles from the Great Southern Mountains.

He They covered their faces with their hands and faced the brightest star that night. They repeated the prayer for the eve of the tournaments, when the sky gave its signs after the storms, the dawns with the souls of the dead returning.

Tol asked him for advice for the next morning, he was afraid of what the heavens might portend.

-Each color is a state of the spirit- the priest began to explain.

Although Tol had already heard it several times before, he liked to listen to it while his eyes were lost in the sky following the changes of the auroras.

-For those who died with Grace the face is white. If they have committed minor crimes, yellow, but if they are unforgivable, it will be red, brown or black. Even on starry nights, darkness conquers for the multitude of souls in eternal pain. Children should not go out on those nights. Their innocent spirits are trapped by the damned.

Tol stood thinking, staring at the sparkling night images. A white and ocher wave passed at that moment, changing shapes, and breaking into different smaller masses, all moving away towards the clarity of the north.

-What color is my father's soul? -said Tol-II see his face, it seems like a mixture of many tones.

"Then he must still wander around purging his slightest guilt, awaiting the sentence for the major ones," the other replied.

Tol didn't know if he should continue. His act was not confessable even to the most pious of men. The only way to forget

the guilt that cannot be named the guilt of the murderer the guilt that cannot be named the guilt the name of the murderer the fault of the fatherless murderer the name of the old man the guilt that cannot be named until

was to find his children.

-How to redeem myself...?!- Tol shouted as he woke up startled by dreams, his hands clenched into trembling fists to hit his own face. The cold of the night surrounded him like walls of ice. But just before dawn, the northern lights appeared, made just for him. Because his father's face looked like a restless and inquisitive soul. The old man's face took on imprecise shapes, colors so light that they were confused with the white of the snow and the morning mist.

Tol left the hut to observe in that newborn sky, the great waves of lights that came from somewhere in the world of the gods. He heard the sound of the waves singing with the voices of his children.

The only way to rescue them

He put a piece of meat on the fire, thinking again about how to get rid of that big place, the plain of snow and tundra in which there were no shadows to hide in.

is to achieve the means to go in search of it. I must become someone important in the village

He chewed slowly, his attention focused on the memories, his eyes fixed on the movement of the flames. The faces of his children then appeared to him in their midst, and he would have liked to run to the beach to hear Sulla's call in the waves, to see his sweet face on the stones again.

above all demonstrate my skill. If I am a hunter, one of the best from my old village, then I am prepared to be a warrior.

The priest had woken up and was beginning to walk towards the village. The night light was intense, although time and habit had made light his kindest nocturnal companion, because it allowed him to imagine the faint footsteps on the rocks of the cliffs. The sounds from the other side of the sea, the auroras that continued to disturb the sky and adorned it with prophetic symbols of feats and tragedies.

But what was announced in the sky became nightmares in his mind.

He woke up with a sweaty body, and with fear of not being prepared for the first test. He had trained almost every summer since his arrival. He had learned the use of the bow and arrow until he acquired a skill that amazed everyone. Because in addition to the strength of his body gained by work in the port and the shipyard, he had the nourishment of his will. A seemingly inexhaustible food until its objective was met. But it was no longer just about fights and demonstrations of skill, but about making everyone see that he was the leader who would bring the conquest to the lands of the Droinne. But the Northmen were peaceful, and he had known enemies since his arrival.

If my people had this intelligence and their ideas. If we had your peace. They had once told me, a long time ago, that they saw them descend from ships on the beaches west of the Droinne, in their strange clothes and horned helmets, armed with bows and arrows that they never fired at us. They were so close, and so far away.

It took him many years to learn the laws and customs of the Assembly of Chosen, the Council of Elders, the Merchant Company. All the town's trade and barter revolved around the port, where ships arrived from places he had not even dreamed of. On the other side was the city, the wooden and mud buildings always covered in frost, rising from the ice and the steppe, refuges for the weak temper of tall, thin men. The straight, light and long hair reached their shoulders, giving them the figure of a hunched and weak bird.

But they built ships to reduce the distances that separated them from the rest of the world. Something had made them wonder several generations before, what lay beyond the water and the snow, and the answer had come from the trees of the forests near the sea. Then they gathered together and axed from before dawn until after dusk. The women brought meat and water, appearing like slow-moving spirits through the morning fog. Some men carried logs to the beaches for docks, and later to build ships. And many more, the majority of the town, young and old men, children who played around their parents carrying branches and tools, all walked with their burdens inland, to build the village. The rattle of the logs dragged by the reindeer, the clash of the antlers confused with the dragging of the wood on the ground, the shouting of the children jumping. The winter fog, the humidity that made them sweat after noon, the movements of the women bathing their children in the river. That drove them. The idea that the land, the trees, the beaches, the faint sun and even the shadow of winter, belonged to them.

Tol got into the jar of warm water and rested his arms on the edge, thinking about the competition. He was afraid.

There had been too many benefits that the gods, always so reluctant to him and his family before, had granted him at an age when he had not expected they would come to him. Everything he had thought in those years, every detail according to a common goal, turned him into a strategist who drew intricate schemes on the rough fabrics of his memory.

Greater than everyone else in the tournaments, he had the experience and ability gained in the rigor of animal fights, the height and distinction of his maturity. The old man was derogatorily called his opponents, but he had defeated them and reached the final tests.

Although the sun had not risen, the reflection of dawn emerged behind the southern mountains and faintly illuminated his hands. He rubbed them again and again with boredom. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were always dirty.

"More water!" He shouted, looking at the frightened face of his apprentice, a boy no older than the age of his children. The boy began to dump the contents of the containers that he brought from the fire inside the cabin. Then he would go out and fill the buckets in the large fountain where the rainwater accumulated.

"More water," he said again, while the boy dumped the last bucket with the preparation that the healers had given him to protect himself from the midday solstice. Then the boy brought the cloths that the judges' wives wove for the participants, and he left it to dry, while he looked at the field to the west of the cabin.

A large caravan of spectators was heading to the amphitheater.

"A lot of people," he said.

-For his greatest glory- answered the boy.

Tol finished dressing, adjusting a red jacket to his body that would protect him from the cold. He covered his head with the regulation cap. Over time he had had many different hats. First it was a leather one, simple and narrow, then other more attractive ones. Finally, one day, the village elders gave him the one he now wore, similar in color to the long gray hair of his beard. A reindeer skin hat from the high mountains, with two short rudimentary antlers, which gave him the appearance of a half-animal and half-human god.

There were times when he imagined himself as an ancient divinity of the steppes, brandishing his mace over the flames of the sun.

The thundering of the drums had begun to invoke the gods. The representatives of the Assembly came to look for him, but he had already left walking slowly towards the amphitheater. Surrounded by the procession, he looked at the clear sky. The reflection of the ice irritated him, and he

wiped his eyes several times. The boy had fixed his gaze on him, and seemed frightened.

"Don't be afraid," Tol reassured him, and he rested his hand on the boy's head.

The muskrats moved out of the way and sank into their burrows. The frost broke under the steps of the procession. The hills continued to hide the full rise of the sun.

When they reached the testing ground, he heard the fanfares on the wooden trumpets. The women cheered the participants pants as they entered, throwing flowers and splashing them with perfumes of exquisite spices. The judges were already seated on both sides of the field, and gave their consent with a sign of raised heads. They were wise old men, he knew, but his knowledge revolved around commerce.

I'm looking for something else... and here I start.

The competitors stood in the places marked with the rhythm of the drums, and moved with such precision that those present saw nothing more than a single movement. They already had their bows prepared, and their arrows behind them.

The assistants sat together, as if their concern over the death of their masters united them more than the rivalry they thought they felt.

The air was not cold, sweat dampened Tol's clothes.

They heard a scream, the first ordered movement. The younger judge warmed her hands with his breath, his seaweed-colored robe folding and moving beneath his raised arms. He echoed by shouting:

-Alkyser!

god of the north, protect the souls of my children, give me strength, the shield on the skin, the spirit of no mercy.

Someone took a step.

Heads turned. They looked for the figure that had escaped from the lines. The shadow of each one trembled like worms in the mud. The shadows betrayed them.

They had arranged themselves at a distance of five body lengths, lined up so neatly that neither could shoot at the other without a third getting in the way. In that, furthermore, the laws of the game were precise, and elimination for breaking them was irrevocable.

They didn't know precisely how many were there, maybe fifty, maybe more. The field was very extensive. They were going to eliminate each other carefully, and it could take them all day. Arrows were not supposed to kill.

The regulation ordered only injuries to the arms or legs. Not mortal. He who erred would be eliminated as well as his victim.

Some's boots slipped on the muddy snow, and the fear of moving by accident was greater than any other fear. One depended on the skill of the other.

intelligence

patience

The voice from the top of the tribune was heard again over the whistling of the wind.

-Thornmeld!

The usual chant was repeated from the stands. But a scream interrupted her. The first man fell wounded. No one had seen the arrow, sweet and silent like a butterfly.

In my hands you will be safe, leave the game, leave your place for me

That's what he would have told them, and he was telling them in a whisper that the judges would certainly not approve of. He didn't know if anyone saw the movement of his lips, but it didn't matter anymore. Her lips and her eyes, her arms, her hands, were a single thought.

a small wound, just an accurate and painless crush

The men began to fall one after another.

Movements, whizzings of invisible arrows. First the sound, then the image. Or first the scream, or perhaps the fall, the crash, the splash of the palms on the white mud.

He raised one arm with the bow, locking the elbow firmly.

who or what can destroy my arm

The birds that crossed the sky at that moment seemed to sing to the unbreakable strength of that arm.

He raised the other, placed the arrow on the string and began to draw it taut, bending his right elbow as stiff in its flexion as the left in its extension.

The two parts of his mind, complemented and harmonious.

The sun on his body, the light bright and cool.

The future that was materialized and was there, at that exact moment, flowing from the future to the present like a gift or an announcement of certain happiness.

The roar of the crowd.

The amazed faces of the judges, their faces satisfied with the evolution of the game.

The light now clearer reflecting the anxiety made into knots of ice, gestures frozen in the air.

Tol tightened the rope even more, and fired.

He would later make many other accurate shots, the result of long daily practices until sunset for several summers. But in the first shot he felt the competition begin with that imprecise and beautiful sensation of vitality. The same thing, exactly, that he had felt on the hunts with his father, when Zor had taught him how to use the spear.

And in that way Tol knew he was forgiven. He and his father were one again, like when he had carried him wounded and had once again felt part of his own body. Not united, but intertwined, disassembled and re-conceived together.

Father son

my father's only son

When the victims fell, helpers carried them off the field, leaving a trail of blood that was absorbed by the snow. Few remained, and the wait between each move became longer and more difficult to endure. If the night arrived before there were only two finalists, the judges would suspend the tournament to restart it the next day. you with new competitors.

It was necessary to finish soon, but how to achieve it without destroying the rules, without eliminating themselves by trying.

The sun was sinking behind the stands, only a part of its sphere remained at the end of the afternoon. Tol's body could still hold out a little longer, but not the sun. The short days of the north, which merged the wait and time of the fishermen, were today a curse that he could not counteract.

The judges stood up with fatigue and concern on their faces.

They shouldn't do it. Suns, you who have succeeded each other, respectful of the luminous world granted by the gods, only for today I ask you to forget the exact order of your passage. Break the paths that lead you to the platforms of the sky, and unite to delay the arrival of the night. If I, with my weak flesh, am able to hold the weight of a day on my shoulders, you, the seed of time, give me forgiveness for a little more time. Or should I offer them something in return, a part of my body, a fragment of my soul, the lives of my children?

There were three left.

He looked at the other two. One to the right of him, barely five body lengths away, the other perhaps more than twenty steps away, behind him.

The voice of the judges spoke.

-Magnusfer!

The stands murmured a prayer of welcome to the darkness of the west.

Tol imagined the face of the god of night, and raised the bow without moving any muscle other than those of his arms. He looked from one man to the other, as if his eyes had escaped from his skull to sit on the tip of the arrow.

A buzzing noise touched his ear. He hadn't even really touched it, but he knew that the one he had shot must have moved at some point, because now he saw him fall with an arrow in his leg.

The crowd screamed and the judges greeted the competitors.

The musicians began to play. The sea wind had risen and spread the music along the beaches and the village. The festive twilight overcame the torches surrounding the finalists with a warm mist. Torches guided people toward the village, where bonfires smoked with the smells of meat and spices. The entertainment was prepared for the winners of the first day.

Tol and the other greeted each other respectfully. From large terracotta glasses they drank a ferment of grapes brought from the islands of the eastern sea. The musicians continued playing long after the ceremony was over, and the townspeople began to dance when the judges left.

Tol was tired. After receiving the judges' blessing, he returned to the hut with his assistant. Behind them was the bustle of those who continued celebrating, the music and the screams that were fading.

He undressed and fell onto his bunk. Through the vague thoughts of the first dream, the idea of the brief, intense, beautiful female with eyes never equaled passed. That ethereal entity of intoxicating perfumes that many liked to call happiness.

*

He got up before dawn. Even that habit was surprising to him this time. Just opening his eyes and having arrived at the last day of the competition was in itself a divine gift that he wasn't sure if he would ever be able to repay. If he was doing this out of revenge, how long, he wondered, were the gods going to pretend not to know the truth. If they had destroyed the mountain to punish his father, why did they benefit him?

When the gods close their eyes, mortals live. Zor used to say it, but Tol had only learned the meaning of it much later. Despite no longer believing in the gods, his father had let him grow up with the common faith of the people.

Tol repeated that phrase in a whisper, and he thought he heard the absolute loneliness in the voice of his father in the land of the godless.

A white cloud of warm vapor formed in front of his dry lips.

"How?" asked the boy, who was looking at him standing next to the cot.

-Nothing. Let's get ready.

Again, the water was heated in the fire, and the buckets were carried and poured over his body, until his muscles were relaxed, lucid like the mind that governed them.

He spent a while looking out the window, while the boy helped him get dressed. It had dawned, although the light had never completely disappeared. At night there was always a whitish mantle, a large clear lake peeking out from the limestone rock plains.

They stepped out into the cool morning air and walked towards the tournament building accompanied by the escort they had assigned the night before. Already from a distance you could see the flags flapping in the wind on the exterior walls. The birds that formed nests on the roof took flight before the men and women who arrived dressed in their best clothes.

The building was much larger than his cabin. The brick walls have As tall as perhaps five men, there were pillars of smooth or fenestrated logs supporting the roof. Leaves were falling from dry branches at the outer edges, and the frost had formed a curtain of ice.

But seeing himself so close to the entrance, Tol felt the sudden fear of someone who is discovered in a lie.

How long will I deceive you about my strength, of which I myself am not convinced. Today I will be discovered, my true body will be revealed to everyone. My weak skeleton, my painful soul.

They made way for him amidst the music of the flutes and the clapping of his neighbors, which reached him like distant echoes. They were there, touching him, but he saw them from a distant place in his mind. He crossed the entrance and was hit by the hot vapor of the great bonfire in the center, under the fighting platform raised like an altar. The judges had sat in the stands, surrounded by pillars that disappeared into the height beyond the torches. People settled into all the free space around the base, but children had not been allowed inside. The women clasped their hands anxiously, looking up, while some men had sat on the beams near the ceiling and held torches to give more clarity to the platform.

Below is fire, security and knowledge, the protection of men.

Above, the cold and the shadows, the crying, the fear of the children.

And the only contact between the worlds is the warmth of the fire on the soles of my feet. A comforting relief for cowards.

He went up the stairs and two women came to take off his clothes. They gave him a container with oil that smelled like musk and fermented milk, which the widows of the town prepared for the festivals and put on the fire for the previous four days. He let the balm be spread on his body by the warm hands of the women.

He closed his eyes. He felt light and heavy at the same time, as if he inhabited a cloud of trees suspended from the sky. He raised his arms and clasped his hands.

-I'm ready!-He shouted towards the judges. Only his right hand shook a little, and he remembered that that hand had killed Markus and his father.

The opponent's shadow was as tall and strong as his own. He saw him approaching over the vague shadow of those watching from below, and they attacked each other. Tol grabbed his head while the other hit his sides. He began to shake him, but the other freed himself and grabbed him by the arms to make him fall into the fire.

And Tol was spinning in his thoughts.

The vessels of commerce and exploration, the peaceful ships full of goods, of thin and intelligent beings that draw useless graphics, will become great warships. Willing to conquer new territories to extend the domain. But above all, for revenge and redemption. The only feelings that will be able to move ships not yet created through stormy waters, towards burned forests, dead animals and disappearing volcanoes. Until that solitary and unmistakable figure, who with her horn calls death and makes it act with the rhythm and form she has arranged. I can see him beyond the sea, his figure, his arms directing the flames in which the virgins burn. Murders, not atonement. Ceremony of human crimes, not divine. And meanwhile, the gods remain silent.

Tol managed to free himself just as one of his feet swung over the fire, and he hit the other, causing him to fall and slip on the resin to the other end of the platform.

The other ran towards him again and hit him in the side again. Tol shivered for a moment but managed to grab him by the arm. The hair on his forearm had dried and he could no longer hold it down. He felt the sound of bones breaking, and the other remained motionless for a while, still looking at Tol. His lips were bleeding. The sweat had erased the paint and several colored threads fell down his chin.

How to beat if I can't hold it for long. His eyes have crossed my path, and even if I avoid seeing them, the look remains in my memory. The look of someone who is afraid. Like the first time I hunted, the same chill, the burning on the skin

He was in the forest again. People murmured from the shadows like the birds that always watched from the trees. The light from the bonfire fled around the edges of the platform like the evening sun between the trunks, and Tol was able to guide himself to calculate his steps.

He began to back away, as if gaining momentum.

He saw the look of suspicion in the other's eyes.

A murmur arose from the silence, and convinced him of the effectiveness of the plan. The noise came from the rubbing of women's hands, from the shaking feet of men. He felt them waiting for eve He had reached the edge and was feeling the last board with his heels. He slipped but closed his fingers, securing them on the splinters. The other must have understood that Tol was going to pounce on him, and with his injured hand pressed against his chest he began to retreat.

Hunters know that the victim's fear is their greatest ally.

Fear creates the crack in intelligence.

My father's lessons are repeated without him being able to force them to silence. I see fear in the folds of the face, in the trembling hands, in the muscles of the legs.

Back, my friend, there is no way but back.

I don't know what's in my eyes, I don't know myself anymore. I don't know what's on my face. I fear seeing my face in the tongues of fire. But I won't delete it if that's how I win my battle today, even if the monsters are there.

The other continued to back away, hesitating, but the slippery surface betrayed him and he no longer had anything to hold on to. His arms moved in the air and his long hair waved in the light. He seemed to dance, Tol told himself. For a moment he held onto the edge. The man's fingers looked like thin roots that broke easily. Then he fell into the bonfire, but he did not scream.

Tol stared at the place where the other had been a moment before, while the people began to cheer him. The musicians were playing with shrill, trilling flutes amidst the shouts of the crowd chanting his name. Many ran towards the stairs carrying torches. They threw flowers at him that accumulated around him. Some torches went out with the breath of the shouting, and they were lit again in the bonfire, in the flames a little stronger now because of the new meat that no one remembered anymore.

The boy hugged Tol's leg and began to cry. He was going to lift him up to face the crowd, but the confusion and clashing of the people turned into chaos. The guards had to go up to protect him. They allowed only women to pass who were wearing flowers and stone necklaces. He allowed himself to be anointed with spices and covered with flowers.

The judges came down from the stands and tried to make their way through the people. When they climbed onto the platform, they wet his head with salt water, the water where the gods of the north had been born. Then all the people raised their torches and shouted a single, strident cry of triumph. And Tol abandoned himself to long-held tears, but he hid his face so that the reflection of the flames would not give him away.

Sigur ran among the burned logs, under the light of the sky hidden by columns of black smoke. The birds flew over the also burned plain, pecking at the corpses.

The hunters had taken his mother to the eastern forests, so he was going to escape as far as he could in the opposite direction, or perhaps to the northern coast. She had told him that the sea was not far away. And she, despite having never seen him, claimed that he was beautiful.

Then Sigur walked along every path that seemed like an exit, through the cracks between ravines, narrow openings between tall stones or trees. He walked for many days, he met people from his town. But he did not want to speak to them so that they would not think he was lost and arrest him. Except at night, he did not rest.

Before nightfall he hunted a turtle and crushed its head with a stone. He would tear off the shell and eat it after roasting it on the campfire. But as the days passed the weather became colder and more desolate, and he had to search the burrows without finding anything. Then he would spend almost the entire night by the fire, shivering with hunger and cold, until he finally managed to fall asleep. But the cold sometimes woke him up again and he would see that the fire had gone out. The frost was forming on his face, around him on the ground, and all he had to do was look north in search of the sunrise.

And one afternoon he heard a strange, regular and even sound. It was a tapping, a beating of many drums at different rhythms. The music traveled through the earth and up Sigur's legs. He looked down and saw that they were trembling, like those sick birds that he had seen flying on his last reconnaissance trip only to fall with their beaks stuck in the ground and their legs raised. But it was the crows that flew almost above him. He looked up, and his vision blurred. They no longer looked like crows, but rather skinny, plucked birds with large claws.

He hid in an isolated thicket in the middle of the plain that was beginning to become increasingly desolate towards the northern coast. The birds moved away for a while, but soon flew over him again. Then the sound of the drums became louder, and he saw a group of men coming. He could even feel the bare feet coming to rescue him.

But Sigur was barely able to get up anymore. Something had grabbed him, one isry movement, he perceived the wait for the death of those who fought there. It was like a hand, leaving something in the hollow of its belly, a nest that would breed twisted spasms and screams. And when he came out of the bush, already exhausted and in the middle of the field, he dropped to his knees and waved his arms high.

The men continued advancing at the same pace, as if they had not seen him, or had known long before who he was.

But who knows me in this region so far from my people? The only ones looking for me are

Thinking about them and seeing them, now clearly and clearly walking towards him with spears in hand, was a single moment. The same ones who had killed his mother had been following him with painted faces and goatskin loincloths, spears adorned with feathers, waving above their shaved heads, with a wide black stripe extending from their foreheads. The mark of the hunt, he told himself, murmuring with dry, cut lips, as he watched them advance.

But Sigur no longer had the strength to retreat.

The figure of his mother was also in front of him, but she could not help him at all. The hunters' footsteps became echoes that resonated under the gray sky, and rang in their ears. Sigur felt like his head was going to break, that he was falling towards a pit formed in the ground right in front of his feet, and that he had not been there before.

And from the layer of smoke that the volcano had created, which was still dispersing as it slowly dissolved, black birds appeared like feathered skeletons. The spread wings were almost as wide as the height of the trees, the wide, curved beaks seemed to be formed from the hardness of rocks, the slanted eyes had oval pupils.

Sigur felt the claws lifting him from his arms, and saw his feet rise from the ground, and then the men growing smaller, as the plain extended its borders. The hunters turned into a harmless group of angry ants, threatening with spears as small as splinters. The plain had transformed into an almost even blanket of green tempered with brown. At the top of the volcano only the rough and still red tips of the burning stones remained, and the column of smoke continued to form layers like mushrooms in the sky.

Then he discovered, beyond the last mountains, the great blue plain. A surface that moved with gentle waves, a huge river without limits.

Is this the word my mother uttered as another comment, a story she used to distract me?

Sea.

But I think it's the end of the world.

The volcano and the gods immersed in fire could be devastated by these waters.

There were no longer clouds renewing from the mouth of the mountain, no ash or shadows. Sigur's eyes slowly adjusted to the brightness of the sun

passing through the feathers of the birds that carried him. The cold wind irritated the wounds on his arms, he felt that the bird's claws reached his bone. But Sigur held back his tears because what he saw was beyond anything he could have ever imagined. Maybe he was dead, he told himself, and yet he felt more alive than before. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He smelled the smell coming from the sea, clear and strong like a summer morning. Not even the cold bothered him anymore, because it was not cold but air that brought life back to his senses.

The birds stopped flapping their wings and glided closer to the water. Sigur had seen what from afar looked like a drifting log, but then he saw the sails hanging from the masts, billowing in the wind, and the waves lapping against the moss-covered hull.

The men on the deck raised their arms and pointed towards Sigur. They looked agitated, talking to each other excitedly. Some had knelt, as if he were a prodigy, something more than an injured child rescued by birds that after all perhaps were just that: birds, perhaps vultures by appearance, but with a curious instinct of mercy.

Sigur saw the dark faces of the sailors. Arms open and gaze fixed on the sky, waiting for him. So close was he now to the ship that he heard the noise of the flapping sails.

Then the bird let him go and let him fall onto a pile of coiled ropes. The men ran towards him and surrounded him. The birds were already moving away.

Sigur raised his head and the men knelt. They then murmured some words that he could not understand, and one of them began to speak to him in a foreign language. As he did not understand, the others murmured, and another approached and spoke in the same language as Sigur.

"Son of the Beneficent Bird!" the man recited in a litany that everyone repeated.

They were men with beards and golden curly hair, broad bodies darkened by the sun. They dressed in leather jackets or were bare-chested.

They approached him with respect and offered to cure him. They helped him walk

Already r to an area protected by the shade of the candles, and they laid him down on a bed of straw. While one put ointment on his wounds, another returned with food. The water they gave him was sweet, not the brackish liquid that splashed on the deck.

Two days later, he had deposited a thin layer of salt on his skin, and the sun had given it a golden color. He asked about the use of every instrument

or structure he saw, they answered him through the only man who spoke his language. But in each response there was a fearful respect, as if they were dealing with a child god, whose tenderness had to be protected by the rusticity of their bodies.

The expanse of water was so great, he thought many days later, that he no longer cared to know if they were going anywhere. The world seemed to shrink only to the peace that surrounded him, including the reasons for his existence and his memories of the town.

The ship, the sky and the sun.

Sometimes the clouds, the busy men, the calm and the happy.

The ropes and sails, the hunger that had already died, and the tingling created by the rocking of the ship in his body.

One morning they met another ship. Sigur ran to the rail to listen to the conversation between the crew. He could almost touch the other hoof if he extended his arms. Men's voices traveled from deck to deck over the water.

-The envoy of the Bird God is with us. He has told us that he came out of the volcano of the great mountains that we left behind several suns ago.

-We also come from there, but we found something different. They left us this homeless man who has been sleeping on the deck for three days. -And a shrill laugh flew with the wind and was lost.

Sigur looked where he was pointing to the one who had spoken. A dirty man was sleeping on his back. He had a figure and facial contours slightly similar to those of his father. But he couldn't see it well, and besides, it couldn't be him. Sigur had last seen him rescuing Grandfather as the stones of the volcano began to cover him.

The other ship sailed away out of sight, and they were alone again.

The next day a group was arguing and fighting around something that Sigur couldn't see. He approached, and everyone fell silent when he saw him. He didn't have to ask anything, they let him in and he saw a girl her age sitting on the railing, swinging her legs and tapping her heels on the wood. Sigur recognized the same one who had rescued him in the forest.

She looked at him calmly, her light hair blowing in the breeze and her very white skin illuminated by the midday sun.

"What's your name?" He asked again, like the previous time, although he wasn't really expecting an answer.

"Gerda," he answered.

Now she had a specific name, even he could touch her without fear of seeing her disappear. But the men looked at her with distrust.

"She appeared out of nowhere, like the demons of darkness," they told Sigur.

"He saved my life once," he defended her. "He will stay with us."

The girl jumped on deck and took him by the hand. They both smiled at each other. The men moved away, murmuring suspiciously.

Throughout the day, the murmur of dissatisfied voices grew above the deep and serene roar of the sea. If Sigur fixed his gaze on someone, he would suddenly become silent and could not know if it was that one he had murmured about. Sigur never left the girl alone. He grabbed her hand tightly while he saw the grim gaze of the others, who seemed to threaten him as the hunters had done before.

The afternoon had fallen and many began to doze off after eating. That's why Sigur was surprised to see a vertical shadow jumping from a mast, but Gerda's hand had already detached itself from his. Sigur climbed onto the men's backs and tried to hit them, but they pushed him away like a small dog and held him by the arms. The others lifted the girl by her hair and made her hang over the water.

-She has come to disturb the envoy of the Bird God. We will return it to its origin.

Sigur shouted for them not to do it, but there was no longer any respect or obedience in them. They tied Gerda's hands to a board and left her hanging over the water. The waves hit the boat as the girl rose and fell according to the rocking of the boat. Two men were watching him so that he did not go near the edge. It became night, and Sigur wondered how much she could endure, how much Gerda's hands could endure.

At dawn, a thick layer of black clouds began to form from the horizon they had left behind during the night. The men gathered to look at that blanket of mist and smoke so similar to the one they had seen coming from the mouth of the mountain.

-It is the same cloud that followed us from the South, the black smoke of the sacred volcano.

Some covered their faces, others left n fall on deck.

- He's coming to find us!

Sigur listened to the prayers and prayers that those strong men now offered like scared children. The gods of the wind were the gods of the mist. Those who came to take the souls of sailors lost in the mist.

The clouds had spread over most of the southern sky, preceded by a cold wind, and soon began to surround the ship with a deafening hum. Then the insects invaded the ship in flocks that destroyed everything in their path. Then a flutter grew while the plague decreased. The birds were approaching, their wings wide and fully spread. The still distant figures of the birds were taking shape while the insects receded. But the flocks came one after another and flew over the ship. The vultures perched on the masts.

The wood crackled under the weight of the birds. The entire ship lurched. The wings retracted and left room for those who were arriving. They were distributed slowly, almost parsimoniously on the wood, and there was always a place for another one.

When they seemed to have settled for inhabiting the ship, without the continuous arrival of straggling birds having stopped, the first ones began to attack the men. The claws latched onto the heads and with their beaks they tore off ears and noses. The men tried to protect themselves, but the birds pecked at their hands, and then at their skull until they opened it to the morning light. The vultures' tongues had the old smell of many other dead ones.

But they had not attacked Sigur, and beside him was Gerda, protected by the shadow of the wings.

The screams faded during the afternoon, the squawks also became more sporadic and softer, as if tired. The torn sails flapped gently in the breeze.

The twilight broke away from the surface of the sea and rose like a great spot of burning coal.

In the morning they spread the healthy sails, but they were not enough to drag the ship, the night breeze had disappeared. Then Gerda looked for a long time at the birds perched on the masts, and suddenly they opened their wings and flapped them until they created a wind that raised puffs of air that smelled of feces and blood. All the birds made the same movement and waves of wings moved from wood to wood, until the creaking of the hull that woke up advancing over the still waters began to be heard.

The children looked at the corpses. Sigur was going to cover them. But she told him not to do it.

- They will save us.

The days passed with a meekness typical of the time of the gods. The peaceful solitude in the middle of the sea made a restlessness grow in

Sigur's body. But Gerda's eyes, her blonde hair and sunburnt complexion calmed him.

Every day they walked among the swollen bodies. The eyelids had opened and the beards had grown, the nails were also a little longer. Then the vultures came down to feed. Fragments of flesh and bone were scattered on the deck at the end of each afternoon, and the men's chests were hollows invaded by larvae when the birds returned to settle on the timbers.

Then they sighted land.

The ship slowly approached the beach, where a village with cabins stood on the cliffs. Men with nets, knives and fish in their hands stopped to look at the ship. The women came out of their houses and the children looked out from the edges of the rocks. But the women suddenly began to run towards them with their skirts filled with sand, calling out to them, as if they were suddenly afraid for them. They covered their eyes with their hands, because they should not see what they were seeing.

That ship preceded by a nauseating aroma, which advanced without wind towards the beach. Carried away only by the flapping of hundreds of black birds on the masts, of torn sails.

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The men of the village who had cared for him since his arrival looked like fat little bears moving clumsily in their thick coats of leather and fur. Sigur became as timid in speaking as the others were, who when calling him made a hoarse sigh with their tongue between their teeth at the end of his name. He had passed through several villages before meeting the men of the old sleigh, who had come from the northernmost area to exchange furs for food. He and Gerda had been walking along the outskirts of a town they called Aldea del Norte, when they saw them passing by. They thought they were going to kill them with the axes they had hanging from their saddlebags, but the men approached and picked them up.

They lived with two different families for just over fifteen winters. The women taught Gerda the work of cooking and raising children, and men to Sigur the art of hunting and fishing.

Gerda had grown into a beautiful woman that many of the men looked upon with desire. But she had remained faithful to Sigur, waiting for him without showing weariness or disappointment, and keeping the fire in the hut until he returned from the hunt. Sigur told her everything new that he had seen on the plains, while she cooked the meat over the flames, without

stopping listening to it and being amazed by her words. He told her about the wolves hidden in the pine forests that howled in the twilight, crying for the souls that ascended to heaven, and the auroras were the means for eternal migration. That's what the natives said, and Sigur learned to shut up when he heard the howls. He was forbidden to kill the wolves. Who knew if the dogs, almost their blood brothers, would not someday take revenge by leaving them without mobility. Men's legs were never useful for walking on those snowy plains where human steps were less than nothing.

-Dogs save our lives every day. "They take us and bring us from where there is food," one of the men had told him, while they ate at dusk around the bonfires. The bitter song of the owls came from the woods, and it was a monotonous curtain of lamentations.

-The wolves are the owners of these lands, where we are passing through- said the old man who many went to ask for advice. Although thin, he appeared as strong as a trunk; his slightly curled beard offered him a face of wise authority.

Sigur looked at him carefully, intrigued. He sat next to him on the furs protecting them from the frost

-Old man...sometimes I have the concern that I should go further, I mean to the furthest north. There is a kind of call...

The moon looked like a white ball rising little by little, a mass of smooth coldness that reflected the remains of the sleeping sun. From the distance came the howls of wolves, growing louder as the moon rose. The animals must have been running through the trees, fighting for prey, licking each other's wounds, mating.

"Their souls," said the old man, pointing to the forest, "are our dead." We become wolves to live forever.

Sigur made a sneer, and this angered the man.

-Should I rip out your heart to convince you?

The old man stood up, angry for the first time since he had met him, with a wrinkled brow and a trembling fist. But he immediately calmed down, and one of his freckled, pale blond hands rested on Sigur's shoulder.

-Travel to the North, if you don't believe me. Sometimes it is necessary to go in search of it.

-In search of what? If my family stayed in the south, why should I go north.

The old man made a new gesture of boredom.

-Don't you realize? Doubts are wings.

The next morning, Sigur began to build the sleigh as he had been taught. It took him many days to achieve the necessary skill to do it, but he dedicated every morning to that work, before going out hunting. At night he bled foxes, otters or beavers, skinned and butchered them, while his wife covered them with salt. The night wind dried the sweat that the blood vapor produced on him. He told Gerda about the trip he planned. She agreed, and her acceptance was more than just a sign of tolerance.

"Yes," she answered with the tone of someone who really decides.

When the day came, they got up before dawn. The dogs were already tied to the sled by those who had come to see them off. The men greeted him with a hug, the women with a gesture of reverence toward Gerda. The animals took off in disorder, but Sigur held the reins firmly, and the snow ran docilely beneath the sleigh. He looked at the profile of his wife against the background of snow, where only the smoke from the last night's bonfires interrupted the landscape. Gerda's contours were accentuated against that landscape, giving a stolid beauty to her figure.

The road and the lands through which she passed were familiar to her, but she had never been there.

"Sometimes you are sure you belong somewhere," said Sigur.

-It's true - she responded - or to a mission entrusted to her.

-That mission?

-Don't know. I look at dogs and it occurs to me that we are not very different from them. What guides us to the North? Something you couldn't tell me, even if you knew all the languages.

Dogs leading dogs.

Migratory animals in search of prey.

Hunters.

The journey lasted as long as the life of the winter ice, and the time that marked the arid landscape had the unmistakable signs of no time. A space outside the consciousness of things. Air and sky equal to those before and those that would come later. The regions passed by barely different from each other, left behind by the passage of tired dogs. When supplies ran out, Sigur stopped to hunt in the surrounding area. Gerda was lighting a fire next to the sleigh, waiting for him. The dogs suffered. They approached her to receive caresses by her fire. He would sometimes return without having achieved anything, she never reproached him for it. But when she arrived carrying the prey, the dogs licked their lips as they sniffed the bodies, moaning and pushing their owners with their paws.

In the morning, the trip continued. Until they found no more beasts, no forests, no isolated bushes, not even moss or rocks. Only unhealthy, hard ice, liquid clouds that descended like a constant drip of saliva from the sky.

They endured hunger for many days.

Then one afternoon some of the dogs fell dead and the others stopped. There were ten weak and skinny dogs left, but their teeth still held out, for Sigur saw that they had begun to chew the reins. They raised their eyes from time to time, watching their masters. He looked at his wife.

-They are going to kill us, Gerda, and they could save us, right?

He needed to get the approval he so sought in the sometimes harsh eyes of his wife. She didn't say anything, but her eyes expressed consent.

Sigur got off the sleigh and approached the animals with caution. The dogs followed him with their eyes, without growling, almost motionless. The reins were the only thing holding them back. But one of them had freed himself and was walking towards him. The others also broke away and advanced behind.

Sigur had to back away. Gerda reached for the ax and handed it to him. But the movement definitely awakened the dormant instinct in the dogs' domesticated bodies, and the ten surrounded him.

Sigur tried to watch them one by one, holding the ax tightly, which seemed like a useless threat in front of them. The dogs began to growl, saliva slipping between their fangs. He was hungry too, he thought. So much so that he had thought about killing them for several days before. But he hadn't done it, and he was paying for that mistake. He searched Gerda's eyes with a desperate gesture. She had an expression that reminded him of someone. A woman's face with contemplative eyes that went beyond that moment.

Through the eyes of women, my father once said, you can see the world.

Sigur's face regained hope, and he knew there was no alternative but pain. He placed his left hand on the sled and held on with all his strength until she trembled. A bare hand waiting for the cold to numb it.

He looked at the ax in her other hand, as if it were the instrument of a mind separate from his own, and he were someone watching the scene from the height of the sky.

The ax in her right hand, falling over the other and the fingers rolling in the snow at her feet.

Then came a pain dulled by the cold.

The blood thickened and she stopped as she pressed her hand against his body.

Sigur cast a painful glance at Gerda, who returned one full of pride. Then he threw his severed fingers at the pack, and the dogs ran to devour them.

Gerda got off the sleigh and wrapped her husband's hand in cloth.

"We have to attack them now!" Sigur shouted, sighing deeply to overcome the fainting he felt coming. He grabbed the whip with his good hand and wrapped it around the dogs' necks. The dogs tried to break free and bit in the air with their bristly backs, their mouths full of foam and saliva, but their barking quickly decreased. He dragged them one by one towards where Gerda was, while she decapitated them with the axe.

The last one, alone and still chewing the remains of Sigur's fingers, looked up. His eyes shone amid the paleness of the snow, and he lunged with a leap that he could not finish because Sigur met him with the tip of his dagger. By late afternoon, as the bright orange sun was setting, all the dogs were dead on the ice.

Sigur dropped to the ground, and Gerda ran to help him. She tried to see her injured hand, but he hid it again between the red-stained fabrics.

"I'm fine... I'm fine..." she repeated, while her breath escaped laxly from his chest. His eyelids were closing, and his head rested on Gerda's hands.

She rubbed her back for warmth, and felt with relief Sigur's light but rhythmic breathing.

For fifteen days they stayed in the same place. Sigur was delirious during the first nights, dreaming of the birds that he had never seen since he was a child, and sometimes he thought about them, as if hoping that they would return to save them.

She and he contemplated the endless cycle of the sun on the horizon in the afternoons. The color of the snow had become the whites of her eyes. They destroyed the sleigh and with the boards they built a shelter to die with some dignity. The dried skins of The dogs served as shelter. Their meat was running out. At night the wind grew stronger, and dragged them in their sleep towards the slow path, the gradual loss in the race of blood.

One morning Sigur felt his wife shaking him awake, pointing toward a group that was approaching them. His stump throbbed and burned like fire. He was dizzy, but he made an effort to get up and take up arms. Gerda helped him.

They watched the men and women walking towards them. Their appearance was not different from that of the inhabitants further south, short in stature, their robustness kept the heat like lit torches. When they

were close enough, they saw that the group had more than twenty people. They soon stopped and two moved ahead of the rest.

The oldest was a man with a graying beard, who walked with a gnarled wooden cane. He began to speak to them in a dialect that they did not understand, although they perceived familiar sounds. The guttural voice needed little movement of the lips, and the breath gave off warm breaths of recently extinguished bonfires. The other tried to speak to them in the Southern dialect, but hesitated and interrupted every two words.

-We saw the black birds in the northern sky a long time ago, they come every century to announce the changes to us. We've been waiting for some foreigner ever since. Are you the son of the Beneficent Bird?

Sigur didn't know how to respond. He made a worried gesture toward Gerda, but she looked away from him like a mother launching her child to face the world. Then he said almost without thinking:

-Maybe I'm the one they're waiting for.

The oldest raised one arm with his hand open toward those waiting behind him. The entire group approached and surrounded them to welcome them with measured shouts. Some women took Gerda to prepare the food, and the men sat talking in front of the fire. One by one they shook Sigur's good hand, while they looked with respect at the stained cloth on his stump.

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He remained in the region for five winters. He accompanied the others when they undertook expeditions in search of streams or lakes under the ice. He learned to listen to the sound of water and feel its vibration beneath the ground. But a constant thunder that was confused with the wind and the rivers came from the north.

It is Thornmeld, brandishing his ax over the sun, they had told him one evening, when the men began to clean their spears by the bonfire, and the sound of the spears imitated the clash of the god's weapons.

They taught him how to build harpoons to hunt animals under the ice. The entrails stained the snow with large red drips, and the intense heat that emerged from the bodies made them remember the warmth of a marital bed, as if they were the ones who entered the body of the females to cover themselves and return to the origin. Feeling like children who returned as men with their women, to their narrow individual worlds.

Sigur began to stand out for his skill. He knew how to interpret the wind and its probable variation throughout the afternoons, distinguish the colors

of the sun and its auras, the broad clouds of migratory birds that appeared from the north and disappeared towards the south. His shoulders became stronger, his body more resistant, and he endured the cold without regret.

During the summer nights he recounted his memories of the volcano and his mother, the boat trip and the birds. The men listened to his words, letting themselves be rocked by Sigur's curious foreign accent. The heat of the bonfires in which the women cooked the meat, the smell of burning fat, enveloped and bound them even more strongly than the shadow of twilight.

He told them about the distant country where snow did not exist, where the heat came from the great mountains that created fire. He related his journey, and the way in which he had killed the dogs.

-No one kills those animals, they support us- someone once reproached him.

"I did it to survive," he defended himself.

But later the resentment with which they had reacted was transformed into respect. Perhaps the meat of the dogs had provided him with the strength and resistance that characterized him, they said to each other. When he accompanied them hunting, they always returned with more prey, carrying twice as much weight on their shoulders as the others. Sigur's red hair was covered with scales as he carried the nets, and the fish swung behind him.

One day, while they were fishing, Sigur saw one of the men lean beside a stream of clear water that gushed between the rocks and put a cold cloth on his injured shoulder. The man had exposed a large stain.

sun red

A scar

hooves

extensive, crossing the belly,

green land

It contrasted in its whiteness with the rest of the skin.

fruits -Who was it? - Sigur asked, raising his voice loudly almost without realizing it, to silence the strange sounds in his head, expel them with the voices of beings of flesh and blood.

The man stood up and took off the rest of his loincloth, until his entire body was exposed. There were more scars, long, wide and crisscrossing, puckering the skin like poorly sewn fabric.

spheres that are born

"Those who have faced the great white bear, and do not have this," he said, pointing to his wounds, "are dead." It is the minimum memory he leaves.

Then one of his sons helped him get dressed, but he continued talking. His words trembled like the water of the stream.

rains, aromas

-Not only does he not let us enter his territory, where there is more and better meat. It has killed many of the hunters who ventured to try. He devours our children with evil, as if he wanted revenge...

Sigur couldn't see the sparkle in the man's eyes, hidden behind his son's chest as he allowed himself to be dressed.

-My two oldest children died between his teeth...

And the only one who survived, looked at Sigur.

red springing from a white breast

the sun collapses

land

pain

The wound opens, the hooves are stained red, the blood slowly thickens, and takes the shape of a sphere that shines over the fields and forests of a strange world. A land of clear dawns with white clouds that fall to grow among the plants, ocher twilights of flowers exploding in the sky, opening up to create a green land equal to the other, the one that lives underwater. Rain of green shadows. Aromas that rise from the earth, perfumes of alfalfa, of wet grass, of mating animals. Fecal dust falling from the sky. Semen that springs from sources of the earth. Creatures that grow with screams and moans.

The earth dies in the same way it is born.

The sphere sinks again, hides and feeds.

The land without an owner.

The soul without a body.

The lost forests.

He screamed and slammed his fist on the wood of the cot. Gerda had grabbed his arm, and she was comforting him.

"It was a nightmare, nothing more," she consoled him with a voice of water.

Then she told him her dream, while Gerda listened in silence, watching the movement of the insects on the ceiling boards, nodding at each word her husband said as if she already knew them.

-When I saw the scar, I thought I was seeing a spot in the northern sky. A tear in the skin and a sun that rises from the wound.

"And what does the sun do?" she asked.

-He sinks again, but I don't know where, in another body, in another place.

-Have you dreamed that or have you seen it?

-I saw it while looking at the man. He was there but I felt far away. Sometimes I think of my mother, I can see her in broad daylight, looking at me as I walk along the paths, from the top of a hill, sometimes in the snow that runs at ground level and then rises in whirlwinds.

A fleeting sparkle crossed the sky and filtered through the cracks of the cabin, glistening on the sweat of Sigur's face. He covered his face and his wife caressed him.

-The bear is calling me, there he is!-He got up to run towards the door of the cabin. Outside the darkness and silence were intolerable responses. His face contorted in an effort to make out something in the darkness, to see the eyes of the animal he thought he was smelling. Gerda approached and they both leaned against the wall of the threshold.

"You must go," she said, pointing north.

In the morning, Sigur gathered his neighbors. They looked at each other after hearing it, wondering if Sigur had gone crazy. They tried to change his mind.

-When we told you about the bear...- the man with the scars began to say.

Sigur didn't want to let him finish.

-It has nothing to do with you, just me, and I'm not even sure about that. What I'm asking for is advice on how to kill him.

The men were excited by the idea that someone from their village would have the courage to confront the bear. The beast had maintained its hold on the northeast for too long.

"I have been watching the rivers and the floods for a long time," said one of the young people, "the times when the fish come from the northern waters." It is the largest spawning area. If we conquer it, we will have food every winter. I'll go help you.

But the young man's father appeared, pushing his way through the others and grabbed him by the arm. He murmured a reprimand in her ear as he looked at the others. Sigur said:

-I'm not going to risk lives that don't belong to me. Mine is the decision and the risk.

"And also glory, if you defeat him," the other answered, as if he distrusted the true purpose of the trip.

Sigur did not respond. . They decided that he would leave two days later, and they returned to their huts in search of the best weapons they had to offer him. When they returned the next day, the sky was clear and they gathered in groups outside the cabin to choose from the harpoons and knives. The men looked at Gerda, standing at the door of her cabin, illuminated by the midday sun, sewing scraps of fur that Sigur would wear for the hunt. They saw her brave and proud, so different from the rest of the women, who seemed like children in front of her.

"Old Armsted's dagger is the best..." said one with a short beard.

-No! My father's is newer... - another contradicted him.

Sigur chose his arsenal, but if the journey was going to be as long as he expected, he should only carry what was necessary plus food reserves.

"It's childbirth season, the bear will be more ferocious than other times," they warned him.

Some denied it and began to argue with the one she had spoken to.

-It's okay...- Sigur interrupted them, and wanted to alleviate his concern.- You will see me return dressed in his skin. I promise you.

"Don't promise us anything," the man with the scars told him. "The matter is yours because you asked for it."

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Flocks of black birds crossed the sky covered with gray clouds. A sieve of clouds in various shades of black and white. Stormy black with flashes of lightning. Dirty white, like drops of mud emerging from a swamp.

They flapped at a slow pace, with their wide wings spread. The wind between the feathers. The rhythmic flutters only perceptible by the sun's shine through the spiraling clouds.

Two, three, four movements, and the birds continued advancing in a perfect series of endless rows, without bothering each other, without their wings colliding. There was no error in those long aerial caravans determined by ancient generations. Thousands of birds flying from one region to another among the clouds or above the trees or in the middle of the rain.

The flocks dispersed and new ones appeared from the north. The hum of the wings descended until it spread over the surface of the world, and the cry of the crooked beaks faded far beyond the horizon. Screams that stopped being screams in their implacable uniqueness and became echoes, whistles that came from the sky as if the gods were blowing on the forests.

But of all those birds, one bird stood aside. He separated from the others very slowly, until he descended to the height of the trees. And there its size grew.

What seemed like a bird with thin contours, the grotesque and malnourished image of a migratory bird, became the beast with a thin beak, slanted eyes with oval pupils that opened and closed like fish mouths. His body was a set of strong muscles that moved in time with a moaning breath. The wings were like large blue-green branches, with red and gold spots, which began to unfold until they were the length of many bodies.

The bird landed on a rock, and changed shape once again. He looked at his companions in the sky, like someone who leaves something forever in search of something else more desired.

The transformation.

The metamorphosis of the bird into a girl. The dark plumage in the tan hue of a soft skin. The big brown eyes look human. The wings on delicate arms, and the claws on feet.

The girl was there, in front of him, watching him. Strangely familiar to his battered memory, memories abolished to survive, attenuated, covered in ash but firm as wood.

A girl who could have been a mother or daughter, wife and lover or all of this at the same time. But now it was what she had come to be.

The one who was next to her in bed. The woman called Gerda.

Sigur woke up exhausted and restless. He looked next to him, Gerda was still sleeping.

He always dreamed the same thing after a day of hard work, with the usual marks of fatigue on her body, weak muscles and a drowsiness that closed her eyelids. But especially when the craving drove him to get rid of the thought and made him tremble while he chopped wood for the fire. Every blow was an attempt to avoid that dream, but he returned almost every night. And on the rare times when he didn't dream, he became sad. The next morning and throughout the rest of the day, he only wanted to go back to sleep and not wake up until he had seen it accomplished once again. Because the dream had the cruel virtue of reminding him of the day his mother had died, and he had fled from the forest.

He stroked Gerda's hair, and said:

-I'll come back, don't worry. They already buried me once, didn't they?

Gerda rested her head on Sigur's chest, smelling the aroma of the oil she prepared for him when she went hunting to insulate her skin from her cold.

She then she left. The sealskin boots, which were reinforced long ago with the skin of the dogs he had killed, they left almost no footprints in the hard snow of the previous night. He carried the bag with the arrows on his back, and the bow on his shoulder. A saddlebag with salted meat for the trip hung from his neck.

He walked along the river bank. He had been told that the bear's territory was upriver, beyond an impassable barrier marked by the bones that had served as food. He crossed the frozen waters and continued until he found caverns blocked by snow.

He dug a shallow grave and waited. He threw the meat not too far away. He placed pieces of loose ice behind him, to listen to the beast if it approached him - perhaps the bait would not fool it - and continued to watch the entrances to the caves.

He could only hear the whistling of the wind for most of the afternoon. A wide gray shadow began to spread from the north, but he knew it would never get completely dark.

Two days passed, and the animal had not shown up. That delay, that absence, was more disturbing than the cold or hunger. He felt surrounded by waiting, as if it had been incarnated in the silence and the shapes of the snow. For a moment he thought that his eyes were deceiving him by showing him nothing but the arid surface of the world, the opacity of the night that was neither night nor day, and he was there, pushing him down, burying him.

In the early morning, a fragment of the sun began to illuminate the snow. He stretched his numb muscles, thinking that perhaps the beast would never appear, when he finally saw it emerge from one of the caves.

It was larger than any other animal he had seen before, with white fur interrupted only by its eyes, a gray-dotted snout, and claws that left traces of its shadow as it walked. Behind him, two babies followed him.

The female was alone with her children.

The smaller bear staggered, a red stain covering its back. Another animal had attacked it, Sigur thought, and they could not migrate. That's why she was now in search of food, moody and not very accommodating. She circled in front of the entrance, snorting and nudging the babies with her snout to get them back into the cave, but they came back out.

Sigur got up cautiously after checking that the wind was blowing in the opposite direction and did not carry her scent. He waited for her to come closer, but the bear was slow to move forward, pushing her children. Sigur thought about the time his mother had followed her father into the woods when they were engaged. She told him about fear, about the feeling of being chased and trapped, about the hunters' hands on the spears. And she had thought, she told him then, of her children that perhaps she would not have.

The animal stopped insisting on its attempt to keep the babies protected, and slowly approached the meat that was waiting in the snow. The morning sun reflected on the bears' fur with whitish and golden tones. The babies walked stumbling or jumping on their short legs. The sickest one was still far away when the shadow of a cloud covered her.

Sigur didn't have much time, just one chance to shoot the arrow accurately and at exactly the right moment.

She lifted her arm with the harpoon. The thin shadow of her body reached up to the bear. The animal raised its head and looked at him, but Sigur threw the weapon away. She only realized when the harpoon was already in the air, in that indefinite moment of her journey, that one of the offspring had reached her mother, and the spear had stuck in her.

fear is faster, design of the gods, remains of their tears, cracks in the souls of men

there is no way to escape fear

She began to run without looking back, and heard the first steps of the female behind him. But she stopped. Sigur turned around, saw the gestures the bear was making to revive her cub, pushing the body with her snout, biting it to wake it up. She then looked up at him again, and there was more strength in those eyes than in her muscles. It was a look of almost noble hatred because it was so pure, a fury of beauty irreconcilable with what is human.

She now made strange sounds, like cries and screams intermingled, as if a man and a beast were screaming at the same time in a discontinuous manner. Sigur remembered that the village elder had told him that the dead occupied the bodies of animals. He tried to remain composed and prepared the bow. The animal was approaching him quickly. His nose dilated, releasing white breath, his fangs like two long drops of frozen milk.

Sigur raised the bow and held it in the crook of the stump of his left hand. He nocked the arrow and tightened the string with his good hand.

He trembled in spite of himself, his fingers weakened, his vision became a single white spot.

The shot.

The bear stopped running for a moment, but then continued. He continued to advance more slowly. For moments she would fall on one of her legs, and get back up.

Sigur fired several more times. But she continued to approach, straining to reach him, while her fury transformed her face into something more human-like than animal-like. And only when many arrows stuck in her body and her fur was dyed red, she stopped running.

Sigur's hands shook. She closed her eyelids and waited, as if that were enough to turn the facts in her favor. She then opened them again.

Lying in the snow, the bear was still alive. Her gaze shone with the white sun reflected in her eyes, she was staring at him.

And Sigur heard her speak to him

He was a tall man, with a fine face and a curved nose. His long, graying hair had soft waves. When he went hunting his muscles tensed, his wrinkles disappeared. One day I followed him to see the forest he told me so much about. I went after him stealthily, stepping where he stepped so as not to be heard, and breathing very low and contained.

That world amazed me. The leafy trees of so many different shapes and leaves, the flowers I had never seen before, the song of the birds similar to the lullaby of the gods of sleep. The sun penetrated the foliage, and as the morning passed, the heat forced me to stop and rest.

Then I heard some footsteps. Maybe my father had discovered me, although he could also be an animal, at that time I didn't know how to differentiate the quality of footprints. He wanted to hide, but the footsteps seemed to come from everywhere, and I was afraid. I already imagined myself dead in the ivy, my father crying by my side without consolation. The leaves couldn't even cover me anymore, and the crying gave me away.

Between the branches I saw the eyes of a wolf, which was slowly approaching, it almost didn't seem to move. But the expression was not threatening, as if he were just exploring.

I endured the fear as long as I could, but a scream escaped me when I saw him so close. A hand emerged from the thicket, and I thought it was a claw transformed into a human hand, the spirit of the beast that had become a man to deceive me. But that hand grabbed my arm and dragged me away from danger.

After crying my heart out, I rested on my father's knees. I looked at him between eyelids hurt by tears, and fearful of his punishment. He looked at me with furrowed eyebrows and a serious look.

“Disobedience, daughter, is the worst of defects. The only one that will end up killing you before old age.”

I nodded my head yes and wiped my eyes. His voice had no fury, nor mercy.

“You had the privilege that it was your grandfather and not another that you found, otherwise I would not have been able to save you.”

I didn't understand at first. My grandfather was dead and I had not met him.

“Every time you come to the forest you will see wolves, foxes, bears, birds. Many of them are animals with human souls. They are the spirits of the dead that take place in the bodies of beasts. That's why I make sure before killing.”

He took me by the hand and we walked back together. He began to tell me that my grandfather and all his ancestors had lived northeast of the Droinne, where the river currents flow into the great sea, on the beaches of low cliffs and rocky grooves, where the forests are born. Before, a long time ago, when not even my father or my grandfather were born, the river deposited earth and stones until forming the hills on which the fir trees now grow. Towards the south, the barrier of trees increasingly extended to protect the area from the cold of the north. Behind, the sea continued to fight against the rocks, and the wind against the trees.

All our ancestors grew up in the forests. But one day the peoples who came from the southwest advanced in search of new territories. There were wars, countless battles. The men of our town resisted, and would have been able to fight for a long time if a foreign force had not supported the invaders. No one knew who or what multiplied the weapons and taught them curious strategies and traps against us. The old women who were dedicated to calling the spirits said that this race with darker skin and brown eyes had a peculiar virtue. They called it voice perception, because they were able to hear sounds so beautiful that they could only come from the

gods. And because the divine beings were on their side, they advanced conquering, without mercy on those who remained behind. They killed most of the men, and only the children survived after fleeing with their sisters and mothers to the caves on the northern coast. From there they returned a generation later, with other names so as not to be recognized. One of them was my grandfather. The invaders had undone the product of many years of progress, worshiped cruel gods, hunted without measure or mercy and had creatures with their own daughters or sisters.

My father and I walked through the darkened vegetation, while the moon rose. I thought I saw in the shadows the eyes of those men he was telling me about, and I held on tightly to his hand. He told me that the old women of the town had turned to an ancient sorceress, whom none of the men had seen before, thinking that it was just a legend invented by his women. They never witnessed the negotiations, the hidden meetings between the Sorceress and the other old women in the forest clearings. But every morning, the remains of extinguished campfires remained, charred fragments of wood or leather, no longer shaped. Everyone then commented that preparations for a new battle would soon begin; But time passed, without war being proclaimed.

People began to forget, and the women returned to their routine. My grandfather's youth passed, relegating him and his people to living in exile, migrating, although always thinking about the intruders. They didn't know how to defeat those families with wild habits. One of the most feared was called Reynhold, and several perceptives had been born there. These were the only obstacle in front of us, like a wall of men, with eyes open day and night, discovering each of our attempts to reconquer the land.

The generation before my grandfather began to die. It was at that time when the old women resumed their task as wise men. At the end of the funeral they were left alone in front of the tombs, not even allowing the company of the deceased's family. Throughout the following night their voices and moans could be heard, the rubbing of palms rubbed against the freshly turned earth, the clatter of stones under bare feet. Later, men began to tell their women that more animals lived in the forests. People met at night to plan expeditions, but many refused. They said they had faced new litters of strange wolves that they did not dare to kill. In the eyes of those animals the reflection of a deformed moon shone. Then one of the men, while listening to the others, covered his face with his hands to hide his tears. Everyone looked at him, and without anyone asking him, he began to tell what he had seen. The night before he had found his brother, who had been dead since he was a child, stroking the back of a wolf among the fallen logs. A chill ran down his spine, and he had to lower the arrow he had aimed at the beast. The ghost of his brother immersed himself in the body of the animal.

When we reached the hut, lit by the fire where my mother was heating the food, we stopped. Before entering, my father said:

“Your grandfather couldn't choose, he had to be a wolf the moment he died. But it will also be my privilege and yours to choose our abode.”

The voice disappeared to be confused with the voices of the wind. Sigur fell sitting in the snow. He brought his hands to her face, looked between the folds of her fingers at his fallen body, and the memory of Sulla's rape and death formed on the snow. Heat on cold alternating in the images that he had wanted to forget. But today he already felt like a man, and there was no time for excuses or postponements. The dreams had been responsible for reinforcing the pain and anguish of her loneliness as she disappeared into the arms of the hunters.

mother, you have abandoned me

It will be because I watched without doing anything to help you

and also this burden: the new knowledge

Sometimes I could hate you, mother, sometimes I can love you and hate you at the same time

He realized that he needed proof of his feat. Anger focused on the rapid excitement of his muscles, and he had to undo something between them.

Destroy and mutilate.

And there was a body that needed immolation.

First he covered the head - for nothing in the world he was going to look at those eyes again - and he peeled off the skin. He tugged at it while his stump separated the tissue from the fat and flesh. A web of blood flowed delicately and melted like red flowers into ice.

He repaired the arrow holes with a grease mixture. So he was able to make his new clothes. He undressed and stood for a while when he saw the shadow of her body on the snow. The wind spoke in his ear, caressed him with concave and dead hands. It was nice to imagine forever alone in the middle of nowhere. Without thinking about the world that had come upon him, about the immense future work that he would carry on his shoulders.

Oh gods, feel my weakness and my small heart!

My back is no stronger than that of a single man.

Oh, mother, why me!

The world, the people who populate it, overwhelms me.

The burden of my race, the weight of the species, on my back.

Hope and redemption, in my arms. yes, the cries, the screams, locked in fists.

And the survival of a town in my eyes.

No one was born for this, nor can they be taught either.

Then she dressed herself with the bear's skin, and also made a cap with the leftover fragments, and began to walk towards her home.

For almost five days, the rumble of the god Thornmeld's mace could be heard from the North. And all night before he returned, the blows sounded, even louder, in the red sky. Sigur looked at the northern lights, in case he could distinguish the shape of the god drawn on the horizon, but he saw nothing. He felt abandoned despite that sound, which now seemed like just another phenomenon of nature.

One morning he saw the columns of smoke, raised like pillars supporting the body of the gods, or the growing doubts about the gods. The first huts of the town emerged like small ants buried in the snow.

The men recognized him when they saw him arrive dressed like a king of the steppes, with the great white cape falling behind his back, his red hair and his beard covered in frost. They ran towards him and surrounded him, but they did not dare to lay a single finger on the bear's skin, nor to touch the weapons he had brought back. Many others were already approaching now. The women followed him at a distance and with their heads bowed.

When Sigur reached the center of the village, he gave them permission to kiss the animal's skin while he walked among the people. The gestures of amazement and affection, of utmost respect, formed a halo of veneration around him. And he walked slowly, interrupted by the pious gestures of the people, towards the cabin where his wife was waiting for him.

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Lying down and staring at the ceiling boards, he could not rest for most of the night, letting the times of his life pass by.

the extensive life before my life, what I lived being others, being them in me, until I obtained the experience of generations

They returned one after another from his memory, without order or measure. The sun shone with opaque flashes at dawn, the end of the bright night flooded with memories.

This must be the case, he told himself, the anxiety that pleased the malevolent spirits, always attentive to the vigil of restless souls. How not to

feel uneasy, then, if the task of convincing others of the destiny to which he was condemned awaited him, like the sun of those regions, never to sink.

He pulled back the covers, without Gerda waking up. He looked at her nakedness and covered her again. He dressed lazily and cowardly. He was afflicted by the smell of burning wood, the warmth of the bed, the aroma of his wife's skin, the placid sensation of the death of sleep and the awakening of it. He kept all this there, telling him: Do not go, and you will live forever. His body, cultivated in the tasks of hunting and building a home, spoke to him, the houses of the town that he saw from the cabin, the color of the cold dawn on the horizon, bringing loneliness just as a sterile woman brings emptiness to her. your surroundings.

Gerda stood up. They took out the jugs of milk that they stored between ice cubes under the floor. The sound of the ice breaking between Gerda's hands, the smell of the milk warming up, all of this she would remember later. They drank, looking into each other's eyes as they warmed their hands over the vessels. They kissed.

Sigur came out. The wind had died down a little and was carrying the snow that had fallen that night. His friends were waiting for him next to the sleigh. They tied the dogs, adjusted the provisions and searched the sky for signs auspicious for the journey. Some had begun to pray. Sigur paused once more before leaving. He had heard Gerda say something to him, in a whisper.

"How?!" he asked, shouting over the wind. But he did not wait for her to answer him, because in reality a moment later he told himself that he had heard and understood well those murmured words that spoke of the son who was going to come, softer and more caressing even than the summer wind, a haven of sun and warm breezes surrounding them both. He came back to her and kissed her. He caressed the warm, still thin belly in which her son was growing. Her hands touched him to leave the heat of her fingers in his beard.

The men had two more skins prepared to shelter him. Four were placed in the first sled, and the other six in the remaining ones. The whips echoed in the wind. The dogs barked, furiously biting each other. The vision of the road became clearer as day dawned, and the reins tightened tightly. The short caravan set off.

They were willing not to stop until they reached the first town they found. Sigur had not planned a particular journey, town or man they encountered would be the goal of his speech. But there was this yes, the cries, the screams, locked in fists.

And the survival of a town in my eyes.

No one was born for this, nor can they be taught either.

Then she dressed herself with the bear's skin, and also made a cap with the leftover fragments, and began to walk towards her home.

For almost five days, the rumble of the god Thornmeld's mace could be heard from the North. And all night before he returned, the blows sounded, even louder, in the red sky. Sigur looked at the northern lights, in case he could distinguish the shape of the god drawn on the horizon, but he saw nothing. He felt abandoned despite that sound, which now seemed like just another phenomenon of nature.

One morning he saw the columns of smoke, raised like pillars supporting the body of the gods, or the growing doubts about the gods. The first huts of the town emerged like small ants buried in the snow.

The men recognized him when they saw him arrive dressed like a king of the steppes, with the great white cape falling behind his back, his red hair and his beard covered in frost. They ran towards him and surrounded him, but they did not dare to lay a single finger on the bear's skin, nor to touch the weapons he had brought back. Many others were already approaching now. The women followed him at a distance and with their heads bowed.

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They were willing not to stop until they reached the first town they found. Sigur had not planned a particular journey, town or man they encountered would be the goal of his speech. But there was this I have been thinking for many nights before, when the recurring dream did not appear, about the words I would pronounce to recruit men, masses of men, perhaps even entire towns, to drag them towards the South.

That morning the sun was shining, glistening on the dogs' fur. There was in those agitated eyes an enthusiastic look of fidelity, perhaps of joy. If the animals were happy, why not him, after all. The most skilled and strongest, he had demonstrated it. And the men who accompanied him were almost as men as he, beings from the populations lost in the oblivion and silence of the ice.

When they arrived at the first town, two men accompanied him along with a couple of dogs, the others stayed to take care of the others, who barked while Sigur walked away. The village was familiar to him; he had gone there to trade supplies and furs. He saw an old man, a healer perhaps, standing in the middle of a group of men in front of the door of a cabin. Those around him recognized Sigur because the travelers had brought the story of his exploit with the bear.

A tall man, not too tall, but strong and burly. On his back he can carry two deer at a time, and his long hair is red. As much as the northern dawn, they said, and the story had spread across the steppe after the bear herd retreated north. The entire rich area of the northeast was then opened to the passage of neighboring towns. More than fifty towns rushed towards those lands, and the story of the man who killed the beast and was heir to a usurped race was passed from mouth to mouth.

"Welcome, young Sigur," said the old man. The faces of the others lit up as they greeted him. Faces tanned by the reflection of the sun on the snow, some wrinkled or others covered by thick beards bordering very light eyes. But they were dry looks, as if they were always furious, or suffering from a pain that gave them that constant shine.

Sigur offered his gloved right hand to the old healer. The others looked at his left hand, because they said he had lost it in a fight with wild dogs. Then they looked at the sky, because they had been told that the young man was followed by a flock of black birds. The left hand was just a stump covered in cloth at the side of the body, calm like a sleeping animal, and the white bear hat, if what they had heard was true, looked dirty and ordinary. But even those who were most reluctant to praise him, made way for him with respect. The few women who accompanied their husbands looked down as they met his eyes. The surrounding dogs barked tirelessly.

"We need a platform," Sigur's assistants asked, and some men offered to build it. Immediately the old man approached and took him by the arm.

-My respects, Sigur. Your skill comes from a distinguished line of hunters. Your inheritance comes to you from a woman's line.

He looked at him, not entirely surprised by the old man's wisdom, and they walked together towards the stage that the others had begun to improvise. The wood was stained with blood.

-The remains of the slaughterhouse will help you speak to us, young sir.

-I appreciate it, old man- And he kissed him on the forehead.

The old man stood still, apparently absorbed by the honor he had done him, and several surrounded him. The whistling of the wind could be heard behind the buildings: the firewood store, the healer's cabin, and the skin and oil warehouse.

-Men!- Sigur began to say.- I'm coming to look for you! If you know anything about me, it is the ability that I have demonstrated and the legacy that I have received. I offer you a warm land where the plants grow until we are forced to walk with an ax, and the trees have the size and height of the sky. Where the rivers are warm and the water is always abundant. There are so many animals that seem to be born between our hands. Come alone or with your families! Your children will grow up stronger and less fearful. This intense cold, men of the north, dulls intelligence.

When it was over, no one spoke. They looked at him from their sullen faces. That outstanding young man had interpreted his wishes with such accuracy that it was like seeing them turned into snow figures, but tinged with hopelessness at the same time. Desired and contained desires.

Sigur knew that they were fugitives from zones of famine and war, and the snow had initially offered them peace and moderate prosperity. But they had known other climates in other times, and those memories remained burning in his memory, far from the snow that slowed thought.

"Because the mind is lightness and warmth," he concluded by saying, "and the last step of life to stillness, the last flight of the winged consciousness."

Sigur heard the fearful murmur, which grew louder until it hid the barking of the dogs. After all, what did he offer them? Hunger, sec urely, during an unpredictable journey where storms and other men could end up exterminating them. This is how one of them was encouraged to speak. The sun shone on the man's face as if on a piece of ice.

-Sir! -He told him.- We are afraid!

The others nodded.

-I believe it- Sigur responded.- But the more we are, the safer we will be.

However, he did not have enough skill to convince them. Most of them walked away, turning their backs on him and returning with their heads down to where their families were waiting for them.

Late in the afternoon, after gathering in groups around campfires fighting against the approaching night, a few men joined him, trusting more in what was said about Sigur than in the success of the project. The twilight light was dying, and only torn spots the color of plums remained in the sky.

Sigur and the healer walked to the sleighs.

-Did you expect to be successful immediately? - the old man dared to ask him.

The rest dispersed like a group of ants fleeing to their shelters. Sigur sighed. Behind the old man, the purple fruits of the sky opened his pulp and let it fall with the seeds of the night.

He rested a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"I don't think so," he told her.

Maybe I need to convince myself, still.

The same looks were repeated in the next town, poorer than the previous one. There were no buildings, no platforms or platforms on which to rise above the heads of the inhabitants, who had come from many neighboring villages upon hearing of their arrival. They watched him with fear and distrust, wrapped in fox fur coats and hats. Drops of frozen mucus fell from their noses, and their frost-white eyelids seemed to move reading the words on Sigur's lips.

-They know me! They already know who I am and they have already told them what I am going to do. I offer you land and wealth, which although they do not always go together, where I am going, one is not born without the other. I am so sure that I have left my wife further north, and my son who is still growing in her body. She is the earth and he is its most precious fruit. Look at her children and think about that. She left my offspring, the only one, perhaps, that I will have in the rest of my life. I challenge you to do the same, if you are as much of a man as I am!

The only way to mobilize the lethargy of these men was to be tough and demanding, he thought. He looked them in the eye, one by one, but the others lowered their gaze. Then a murmur of enthusiasm began to grow, timid at first, among the younger ones. The old men, who had arrived in that region almost a generation before, watched them with fear, but said nothing. The young people continued talking to each other after dispersing, coming and going throughout the afternoon. Afterwards, they headed to talk to Sigur.

-I'm going with you, Lord!

-Me too!

-And me!- they shouted, more sure of their decision when they saw that others joined the group.

They were given time to gather their sleds, weapons and more dogs. When they left the town, they were already a large caravan sent off by women and children who followed them beyond the limits of the town. Only a few old men accompanied them until night fell, with melancholy faces that showed their sorrow.

In all the towns they passed through since then, they began to call him Great Lord. The news of his trip preceded them from town to town, and in each one they found more men gathered, waiting to celebrate his arrival with ceremonies where they entertained him with food and music.

They reached a village much larger than the previous ones, and after entering with his usual entourage and the almost three hundred men that he had managed to gather, Sigur got up from the sleigh. Carrying two dogs at his side, he walked towards the center of this new town.

The residents surrounded him to touch him, but his men formed a barrier that protected him. The children approached him with offerings that the women had asked them to deliver.

"Too much respect, but no loyalty," Sigur said to his men, loudly, as they advanced. And those words spread like a moan of disapproval and rebuke from the great man towards the residents. People heard them and they were repeated by word of mouth through the lines that followed him towards the center of the town, and expressions of shame appeared on their faces.

Sigur had dressed himself in the skin of the northern bear, certain that such an appearance would accentuate the force of his words. He needed to convince many more men.

If they saw my body under these skins, if they saw my male body, they would not fear me. Although strong, I have only two arms, and although brave, I have also been pretentious.

He straightened his back, faced the crowd with a defiant look, and climbed onto the platform that had been built for him. The dogs were watching around them, cautious.

She stabbed the ax into the wood in front of his platform.

He extended the stump of his left hand with a gesture of extreme delicacy, as if offering the most valuable part of his person to be revered.

Then one of the dogs licked what was left of his hand, and several voices of astonishment arose from the people.

-You know me, men! I order you to accompany me! Whoever does not come will face me upon my return.

He stopped because everyone was pointing towards the roof of a stable. He turned and saw the vulture, perched calmly and attentively on the edge of the eaves. The birds had returned, and he no longer felt so alone. Then he looked back at the town.

-Maybe they think I will never return, but doubt will be the tool that will dig their graves.

He immediately left him to return to his sleigh, ignoring the flattering pleas of the most prominent to visit his house.

The bird followed him to the caravan, and perched next to him.

They had to wait almost all day for the men who would join them. There was almost no one in that village who was not willing to follow him. They carried bags of clothing and food, and some also carried their wives and children. There were farewells, cries of resigned discontent, acclamations of victory and blessedness. Those who remained watched the long caravan slowly awaken from its slumber on the snow.

The vulture took flight and joined the flock that had appeared from the northern sky to escort them. The mist of winter twilight enveloped them all in its shadow.

THE VIRTUES OF DEATH

An evening of colors arduously dilated by multiple suns, strong and dark yellows. Clouds that look like remains of unfinished combustion. A sky that disappears in its fall, collapses upward, to another higher sky and perhaps calmer or more perennial. But here, near the earth, even the air hardens, petrifies after the last union of its elements, after being fire, gas, liquid and again gas, air and fire again. The sky becomes earth, wood, as if the trees spread their seeds there too, capable of sprouting in the suspended mud, the mud smoke.

“They support us. They are the land.”

The proximity of the earth frightens the primordial inhabitants of the sky. Insects, birds, demigods, nameless phenomena in hopeless defenselessness because they are made of unworthy material. It is in these evenings when monsters emerge and dominate the landscape. And while gloomy shapes emerge from an opaque dying sun, the monsters have gathered around the mother who begins to emerge from the other end of the sky.

“The ground we walk on.”

The moon speaks to her children in a language of wooded tones, an arid forest. And each of the figures on the surface of that moon is the point where the end of men begins. Each inhabitant, each boat or house, child, woman or old man, clearly sees its beginning and its irrevocable finitude. Therefore, when she, the goddess of the night, appears in the sky, the bodies revive.

“They sustain us, they are the earth, we walk on them.”

The rest disappears into nothingness. And the void induces the pity of the dead. Those who have already been and know the absence of being. The nerves of her dead limbs are reborn, which only the goddess is capable of stimulating.

“They sustain us on the land on which…”

They are born from the places where they were buried, and forget the place of sorrow. Site of limited wisdom, unbearable stillness. They dance, they light bonfires. They are faces that had eyes, hands. Voices that have grown harsh tonight.

“We walk on them, we do not fall because they support us.”

He is in the middle of the bonfires. He listens to the enormous voice that repeats phrases heard many times, confused with the screams and the rumble of the skin of the dead in the renewed night of hope. The moon moves his many eyes, similar to a pit dug in the dark earth of the sky, into which he wants to put his hands and fill his palms with those larvae. The life that eats life in death.

They are the land we walk on, he repeats the voice.

He takes his eyes off that moon, and he listens to the order. But the voice, no matter how much it seems like an order, is just a statement. A memory that he had decided to forget because it belonged to his grandfather.

He sees the face in the crowd. Among the shapeless faces, he recognizes the face of someone he saw die. And she is approaching him.

The body is different from the others, as if it had never been exposed to the worms. He knows that body devoid of vileness that walks towards him. But his memory resists the revelation of the name.

The figure makes its way through the dances and orgies of the dead. It grows larger, increasingly clearer in the moonlight that tries to facilitate Zaid's memory.

He suffers, cries for not recognizing who he believes it is his obligation to kiss on the forehead, and perhaps also put his hands on his neck and close them. But, it is said, I already did something like that. Results, that is what it is ultimately about, which by any means are the same. He must recognize the face.

When he has approached her, he squints his eyelids and strains his gaze at the face in front of his. The oval face with the beard and eyes of imprecise color smiles with a slight gesture of disdain on his lips. The pupils become oval depending on the movement of the eyes, like a forest animal.

Then a growl of fury arises from the depths of the open mouth.

He now he knows it. He understands the language, although without having ever learned it, and sees what is engraved on the dead man's face.

The nameless face, he thinks, upon waking up.

He opened his eyes to the sun fading behind thick clouds. His body was still that of a growing child, and it hurt. But he was not thinking too much about this yet, but rather about the memory of the dreams that persisted in reminding him that he had not buried the man.

Grandpa Zor repeated his tedious litany over and over again. It was curious how that old man's words had stuck in his memory more strongly than anything else said by those he thought he admired.

They sustain us.

The buried ones.

Their task of supporting the weight of the living.

Without them, the living and the dead would continue to be, as in the beginning, a single common mass of mud.

Your earthy voice, your mouth full of air and nothing. If I was nothing more than your instrument nto, still against my weak will, because my body is also still weak. Damn you, old hunter!

After running for a whole day along the river bank, he began to think about what he had done. He had the feeling that something was missing. Repentance didn't come into it, he knew that; However, killing a sleeping man, even the man who had humiliated him, was not an act his father would approve of. If one kills it is to eat or defend oneself, Tol had told him, and his defense now seemed to him like revenge. He alone had managed to make the victim's soul threaten him in his dreams.

He stopped to look at the birds flying in large flocks over the entire area. Some men, in the distance, tried to scare them away with shouts and stones. He managed to distinguish the colors of the witcher's robe. Reynod prayed and urged the birds to leave. But perhaps they had other gods, other fears, because they remained there spinning without tiring, attentive to any motionless body. A gray drizzle diluted the contours of the trees, the surface of the river, the earth that caked into high piles of mud where the waves of the current crashed.

He looked back, ready to go back, but he remembered the exact spot where he had left Markus. The landscape had changed too much in a short time, and he walked towards the people surrounding the witcher in the hope that the old man had been taken there. He passed through the smoldering embers along the beach littered with the dead and wounded. A caravan was advancing away from the river towards the north. The members wore shabby black habits, and an old man walked next to the dead man being carried by four men.

"It must be the funeral of an important man," said someone who had stood next to Zaid, watching the same procession. The clouds dispersed for moments and let the sun illuminate the fir forest, the long, pale shadows of the trees formed columns that crawled along the ground towards them.

-The old man is the leader of the rebels, he looks like the craftsman... but I don't know who they are carrying.- The man who spoke glanced at the

witcher's congregation, and lowered his voice. -It must be someone who plays dead to escape.

Zaid looked at him in amazement. He knew that the rebels should not even be mentioned, his condition was even more precarious than that of a slave.

"Son, don't look at me like that," said the other. "No one will pay attention to you now, we are all busy burying our dead."

Zaid walked away following the path along the shore. From time to time, he turned to watch those heading north seeking refuge on the distant coast. From time to time, icy gusts arrived from the sea, distant but faithful messenger of winter. He felt chills that made his almost naked body tremble, irritated by the burning of the burns. The wind prickled his skin like locusts. He quickened his pace toward a group sheltering by a campfire. Some women saw him arrive shivering and came forward to cover him with furs that smelled of blood.

-What is your name? -One asked him as she led him near the fire. She repeated the question two or three times, but he wasn't going to say his name. He even hoped not to be recognized with that dirt mask. He then had an idea that would facilitate the search for him, and he said:

-I am the grandson of Markus, the one with the Clear Eyes, and I am looking for my grandfather.

Nobody knew how to answer him. A warm vapor rose from the lava river that not even the cold breeze from the north could completely overcome. He was getting dark. Farther away, where many were gathered and praying, several bonfires gave off thick black smoke with the smell of burning flesh. Then he walked towards the witcher's voice, growing clearer and louder as he approached.

-The virgins have the aroma of the sap of the green stems, they take time and suffer and resist being burned! Thanks to them the wrath of the gods has ceased!

A clamor, almost a thunderclap, was heard from the men and women surrounding Reynod. The crows flying over the bonfires flew away with the boom of voices. The people began to disperse as the ceremony ended, and Zaid found himself among hundreds of men and women searching for their dead. They lifted the heads of the corpses from the mud and let them fall again. When someone was recognized, the men carried him, or several women dragged him. And the arms and legs of the dead then made the last journey to the graves, swinging on the backs of their loved ones.

Zaid also looked for the nameless face, but all his bodies seemed perfectly the same to him: sad, dark, rigid. Death was the most skillful mask in the world, Grandpa Zor had once told him.

closed or open eyelids, eyes with a lost look. deformed faces and necks. mouths ajar, tongues twisted you give. black languages. dried blood. ants entering the ears. pecks of scavengers who taste the flesh and despise it.

For five days she was asking and looking for Markus or his son, but she realized how impossible it would be to find a face among so many that had lost their physiognomy forever. And when the fog had settled at the end of the afternoon, she heard a voice shouting in the mist, between the trees.

-Bring more axes, shovels and dirt!

It must be one of the gravediggers, Zaid told himself. He had not met many of that breed with a monotonous but firm voice, with sad and resigned tones, those with eyes as black as their clothes. That cloth adjusted their bodies as if it were measuring their size for the grave in which one day they would rest. It was said that they dug their own grave on the morning of the last day of work decided by them in old age. In the afternoon of that day they would still dig for others, but later, when the sun finished setting, they would drop into the pit that the rain would cover with the earth piled up on one side. All this was said about them, and if what Zaid had heard was true, the gravediggers' knowledge of death was going to be useful to him.

He entered the fog of the forest, guided by the voices, the panting of the diggers. A figure of smoke barely more defined than the other shadows around him, the man stood next to a tree, one arm extended toward the pile of bodies carried by his helpers. When his eyes adjusted, he could see that he was dressed in black and his beard almost hid his face with a dark halo. But the other caught him looking at him, and appreciated getting angry.

-What are you looking for?

Then a few pale, ocher rays of sunlight pierced the fog, and Zaid made out the mark on the man's forehead, the spot of burning charcoal that confirmed his position.

"I want to know..." Zaid began to say, but he began to cough and spit out saliva and blood.

The other gave him water from a vessel.

"I want to know..." he repeated. -...if I can talk to them...-And he pointed to the corpses.

The man looked at him strangely and made him sit with him next to a tree. The branches rustled in the wind, while the afternoon humidity made them sweat.

-Who told you that they are going to answer you? There are times when they don't even answer me.

"My peace depends on that," Zaid answered.

A shine must have appeared in his eyes that moved the man, because he put the pot aside and quickly looked away, watching the work of the other diggers. The earth mixed with ash, leaves and branches was a tangle of viscous and impenetrable mud that hindered work.

-I have to know if there is a dead person I know among those buried. Otherwise, I'll have to look for it and dig the grave.

Zaid thought he was not paying attention to him, but suddenly he thought he heard him moan. The man then turned around, he had an expression close to pity.

-Son, that could take you a lifetime.- The undertaker's voice was heard distressed.

"But that's not what I'm afraid of," Zaid replied.

Then the other grabbed him by the shoulders and kissed his forehead. It was not a sign of affection, but of pain, Zaid thought, his lips were dry and rough like the ground with stones.

-There are chosen ones, my son, and from time to time we meet, recognizing each other...

The kiss had, while it lasted, the certainty of a condemnation, but it did not exclude mercy for the new soul dedicated to such a task.

"Pity for the dead, mercy for him," the man murmured with his eyelids closed, and then he marked Zaid's forehead with a handful of dirt.

-Now you are anointed. You will be the most important of my assistants. From this moment on, I give you my hoe.

Zaid worked all the rest of the day digging graves. From time to time, he sat down to rest, wiping his forehead and looking up into the distance. Beyond the other diggers, who crouched and raised themselves restlessly, behind the fallen trees and the mist and ash that still hung in the air, he managed to discover the witcher's assistants. They were burying the bodies of the young women in a spot on the beach, undoubtedly chosen by Reynod. The virgins' grave was the exclusive work of his entourage. The bodies had been wrapped with large green leaves, and looked like worm larvae waiting for the river to flood to return to the spirit of the forest.

But the bodies of the townspeople were abandoned to the task of the gravediggers, because the earth, mud and rot, Reynod had said, was the impure material with which they had been created.

During the following days, the teacher taught him what he needed to know for his work, but Zaid only thought about the face of his dreams, searching for it in each of the bodies that he buried.

-What is your name?- the teacher had asked him many times. times, without getting a response. And she did it again.

The young man thought about lying to him, but remembering the one whom he could not find, he realized that he was no longer unnecessary to him.

-My name is Zaid...and I'm looking for Markus with the Clear Eyes.

The undertaker stopped his task and reflected, resting one hand on the handle of the hoe and the other on the boy's shoulder.

-I am one of his children.

Zaid looked at him with resentment, as if the teacher had also been keeping a secret.

-Why are you looking for my father?

He was slow to find an excuse to replace the truth.

"The old man took care of me on the raft in which we fled," said the young man, "and I lost sight of him." Another of his sons was also there.

-That must have been my brother, the youngest of all, the one who had to endure my father's madness. If I told you what Volfus did for the old man...

So that's his name, and his face comes back like in the night. But today I am awake, although the dances of the fog hide the forest and the men who inhabit it.

The small eyes, growing like two circles of water when a stone is thrown, always larger, darker, bottomless, without limits that calm the sensation of falling into the abysses.

The eyes of the crescent moon.

A wolf howling, on a rock, at the night reflected in his eyes.

A black wolf praying to the moon, yellow monster of anger.

"A bad man," Zaid added, without thinking, and he feared the reaction of the teacher, who was slow to respond.

-I haven't seen him since I was a child, but even then he was strange. Although no one is bad, son, I know it because they have told me so.

He then looked at the corpses turned face down in the large grave they were digging. Then he grabbed several handfuls of ashes and spread them over the bodies. He murmured a litany, closing his eyes. Opening them, he saw Zaid watching him.

-You will learn. It took me a long time. One day you will be happy if at least one gets to talk to you.

Zaid returned to work with that hope. At dusk, they left together with hoes on their shoulders and bare feet on the earth strewn with new bones. The moon guided them towards the undertaker's hut. After eating, they slept with their muscles as tense as those they had buried were rigid.

He lived three winters with the master, and learned the trade until he acquired the same skill from him. They got up before the sun, and after washing themselves in the waterfall that the stream created behind the cabin, they dressed in tight black clothes. Zaid's back had grown with the daily task of excavations. His shoulders were also strong from carrying so many moldy bodies, static as trunks.

And he continued searching in each one for the face from which peace should come. The serenity for his dreams. He even tried to talk to them when he was left alone, in charge of minor tasks such as cleaning the tools, choosing or removing the land for the next day, sometimes burying newborns that the mothers gave birth already dead in the forest. On those occasions he remembered the children devoured on the raft, and his piety made him dedicate a special part of his time to them.

"I'll do it, master," he had told him one day, and the other gave in, not without a certain pride in the dedication of his apprentice.

But the dead never answered him.

The eyelids remained closed, and even if he opened them, forcing the dry skin, feeling the hardness of the eyes, he never found any signs of response. His purple lips never moved with the revelation.

His body is no longer a body. It's air, it's a handful of dirt, maybe not even that. Dust that spins between the branches, frost on the wings of birds, feces under the feet of deer. But he has time in his hands, and I have time that flies in joy and drags in hardship.

The stillness and silence without wind or breeze, not even the slightest movement of air.

Nothingness, time stopped.

One night he sat down to rest on a rock. He fell asleep and woke up shortly before dawn. The stench of the corpses that he had left unburied

rose from the open wells, flooding the forest. A small fire gave him some light and warmth. He looked at the face of the last one waiting to be buried. He saw a wound between the lips and the nose, and he had a strange idea. Knowledge that no one could have taught him, but it was there in his mind, clear and easy to verify.

He feared he would be wrong, but the worst that could happen was to awaken the dead man's anger, and that was at least something new compared to the nothingness of silence. With one blow of the edge of the hoe, he buried and split the face. His bones were broken and his head was split open. fragments.

Zaid was sweating, although the early morning was cold. He was sure that he would see the origin of language, of the memory of men. He took out the splinters one by one, he hurt his muddy fingers many times. Behind the broken bones he saw a soft mass covered by a crackling membrane and swollen with internal fluids. With the edge of a knife he cut it, and the opaque and nauseating material spilled onto the floor. The liquid slowly eased in intensity, and he tried to hold the gray mass between his fingers, but it kept slipping. It seemed that even after everything, the essence of the revelation was still being denied to him. Then he heard the teacher's voice behind him, and saw the barely clear sunlight that was appearing far away, still very weak, like a torch that exposed him making a mistake.

"Sacrilege! Who taught you this!" the teacher shouted, grabbing him by the shoulder and hitting him in the face.

Zaid looked at him with shame.

-They never spoke to me...

The other shook his head disconsolately and sighed deeply.

-Your problem is that you are looking for the spirit among the lifeless bodies. And I don't know anything about that. I only know about corpses.

His voice trembled as he spoke, and Zaid had the feeling that the teacher had never said that out loud.

-Who are you looking for?

"Volfus," Zaid answered, in one breath, and that name seemed to leave a mark on his face, sowing sadness and sadness. –I killed him, and with each passing day, master – Zaid was now crying – his body rots, and his soul will migrate forever at the expense of my peace.

-Don't worry, I won't blame you for his death. I already told you that Volfus was strange, and in a bad way he had to end it. What if you find that he has been buried?

-I will have gotten rid of the guilt.

Zaid's gaze became transparent, as if by just saying it, he would be free of the darkness behind his eyes.

The morning light fell in braids of sun around the oaks, and was reflected in the gravedigger's gaze. The teacher had begun to meditate, sitting next to Zaid on the edge of the grave, both of them looking at the open head of the corpse in which the birds had begun to dig. He put an arm around the shoulders of his apprentice, and spoke to her as one saying goodbye to a son.

-My father buried the knife with which Volfus amputated the dead man's foot. It occurs to me that he could have taken the body to that place.

-Are you sure?

-I'm from Markus's family, don't forget... but it will be your job to look for another of my brothers, the one who has learned to heal the sick. He is the only one who knows the place. He once told me that he dug up the gun, without our father knowing, and he kept it. He lives west of the Droinne delta, in the Open Fields.

Zaid set out in the afternoon, with the clothes that had been the undertaker's when he was young and a bag of provisions swinging on his back. Two or three times he turned to greet his teacher, but just as the brightness of the sun disappeared and was occupied by the first shadow of evening, the undertaker thought he saw something else next to the boy as he walked away from him. An animal, perhaps, but as tall as a man. A shadow, he told himself, nothing more. He took the hoe and returned to the forest to resume his task.

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The land was barely disturbed by hills with green or yellowish grasslands swaying by the wind, by low hills similar to the humps of the gods who live beneath the world to control the dead. Some narrow hollows alternated in the plain, and the light, reflected on the grass and the bushes, sank into them as if swallowed by the earth.

Throughout the summer that his trip lasted, the people he met on the roads spoke to him about the towns of the east. They said that the men seemed calm, but they used to get angry at night when drinking the wine prepared with the grapes they planted. They also described the stone houses and chimneys built by the same men and women who worked the land.

When he reached the valley, he stopped to look at the village in the distance. But dusk had already set in, the town was still more than half a

day away, and sleep was beginning to overcome him. He lay down among some tall plants with dark green leaves that he did not recognize, among spikes moved by a warm wind dispersing the seeds. He felt protected by the stems, while he tried to distinguish where a faint but continuous sound of water was coming from, which he had not been able to discover along the way.

He opened his eyes again for a moment before finally falling asleep, and saw the ears of wheat rising towards the moon, less cruel and whiter than in the forests of his childhood.

In the morning he continued walking towards the sound of the water, and found a narrow stream enclosed between boards. The dawn made the fields shine. Far beyond his sight, the colors of the earth followed one another without interest. eruption. The dark yellow, the white, the purple, arranged in sectors of various sizes, one after another, linked by uninhabited roads and paths.

He found no one all day, and when hunger and heat overwhelmed him, he saw a cart and an ox grazing on the side of the road. He had no weapons, only an old dagger and the clothes that the gravedigger had left him, and he stood next to the animal looking for someone in the surrounding area. He heard a hoarse voice, and the shadow of the speaker came between him and the sun.

-What are you looking for?!- said the old man. He had thick eyebrows and tanned skin.

-I'm looking for Draiken.

"The doctor lives in the village," he answered in a bad mood, while he unloaded a bundle of straw. He was an old man with broad shoulders, a gray beard on a bronze face, and his head covered by a dirty cloth. Seeing Zaid absorbed in contemplation of the ox, he shouted:

-You savages! They live migrating and hunting... they never learn anything. This animal can kill you with a kick, but it will never warn you. It is more dangerous than the beasts of the forests.- The old man shook his head in resignation.- You arrive in hordes, you destroy my crops worse than a plague. And when they don't find game, they kill the oxen.

Zaid asked him if he had seen anyone from his village. The old man laughed. How the young man thought that he would have time to recognize even one of the many who had looted him. But the young man's look softened his sullenness.

-Many came after the volcano erupted. I heard that they burned the town's virgins alive, but I didn't believe it, that can't happen in these times.

Some even wanted to live here and pray to their bloody gods. Oh, you ignorant and savage ones!

He repeated that phrase countless times as they walked towards the village. Zaid realized that the old man was almost blind when he saw him get into the cart, feeling the reins, letting the horses drag her through the green fields, through the crops and crossing the streams. The twilight light was beginning to dye the bushes along the road with a layer of red mist.

He heard the voices and music growing louder as they approached the town. A man was playing a wooden and stringed instrument, and many women surrounded him. Other men argued and threatened each other with their fists, but then they laughed and slapped each other on the back. A drum beat where some children were playing and running. The doors and windows of the cabins shook with the blizzard, which carried a warm smell of cooked apples.

The dialect he heard spoken was more difficult than in the rest of the towns he had known, but the old man had taught him a few words along the way. The people spoke a language less harsh than his, perhaps more delicate, but there were similarities in many sounds with those of his own language.

It was almost night. Since he did not want to ask for food from the old man in the cart - the phrase of reproach against the people of Zaid, repeated ad nauseam, made him sad - he was now hungrier. He needed to find Draiken if he wanted to eat and get some sleep.

He walked through the streets, while they watched him from the houses. He noticed that the women stopped stirring the ladles in the pots on the fire when they saw him passing, and the men stopped hammering on the boards. But no one dared to observe him for more than a few moments. If their gazes met, then they would quickly look down and mutter something under their breath. The children who approached him immediately retreated at the screams of their mothers, who made them return and locked them up. A sound, a strange word could be heard vibrating in the air, as if all the voices in the town were pronouncing it at the same time.

People followed his steps, looking through the half-open shutters. The eyes of the curious were sometimes directed above him, or behind him, or to the sides of him. Zaid looked around to see if anyone was with him, but no one was there. The dogs barked at him as he passed, then the bark became a howl lost in the darkness. The moon made the shadow of the houses extend over the streets. The sounds he had heard upon entering the village diminished, and the music had ceased altogether. The last voices were hidden behind the doors. Only one old man dared to tell him where the doctor lived.

"At the end of the street," he said.

He found the place and stood in front of the door. He slammed his fist three times.

A tall, thin man, with a crown of short white hair and a blonde beard, opened the door. Zaid was surprised by the resemblance to Markus. The man tried to close the door again, but then stood still as he looked to Zaid's right.

-His brother, the undertaker, sent me.

When the other looked at him again, he seemed to calm down and let him enter. A fire illuminated the room from a corner. The walls were covered with shelves of instruments that glowed with flames, tweezers made from bone chips, knives and stilettos of many sizes. On the tables were human bodies, some cut into fragments, others complete.

The man was looking at Zaid, without saying a word. He didn't move away from him, perhaps because he didn't seem cowardly, but he didn't dare get closer either. Only after a while, he pointed towards the space next to Zaid.

-What have you done to the shadow that accompanies you? -He asked.

-What shadow?

The other watched him more suspiciously.

-So you don't see her, have you never seen her? He took a few steps back and leaned on the table. "You're cursed, don't come closer!" But he wasn't talking to the young man, but to the shadow.

-His brother sends me to learn the trade.- Zaid wanted to ignore the doctor's fear.- I will help him as long as he orders me, as a slave if he wants, in exchange for something I need to know.

-If you come from the world of the dead, there is nothing I can teach you.

-I'm trying to escape from them. If what he is seeing is what I suffer in my dreams, then he will understand.

-I see Volfus, he seems to be alive but he is nothing more than a shadow.

-You can tell me where his father took him.

-Because...?

Zaid looked at the bodies on the table. His eyes shone as he saw the uncertain reflections of the dead flesh on the board. Draiken covered the corpses with a cloth, and also hid the instruments that could be turned into weapons.

"I killed him," Zaid murmured. And the shadow next to him grew, and the man shouted:

-Careful!

But Zaid had seen or felt nothing.

"Don't worry," he said, so peacefully that he looked older than the world. "He waits for me in the dream, he knows it's something I won't be able to avoid." If constant vigil were possible...

Draiken added fuel to the fire until it was so intense that it expelled the darkness from the room. Nothing but the ceiling remained in darkness, and the specter had hidden there. Then he prepared something to eat and drink.

Zaid left nothing in his fountain, and although he felt dissatisfied, numbness overcame him. His eyelids closed slowly, and his head leaned on one shoulder. The doctor had his elbows resting on the table and a wooden glass of warm milk and honey in his hands. He talked to him to keep him awake.

-My brother...

-No! The undertaker does not want his name to be mentioned. He thinks that by naming him, years are taken from his life.

"I know," he answered, unable to help but smile, "My brother, the one who speaks with the dead." There he and his beliefs.

-He told me that his father could have buried Volfus in the same place where he left the knife.

Draiken looked at him suspiciously this time.

-I raised Volfus for almost ten winters, he was the youngest of us. He became a resentful man, but I still love him, and I'm not sure I'd help the guy who killed him.

Zaid felt the cold of a shadow moving just under the ceiling.

-What is it, what shape does what you see? -He asked, not to convince Draiken, but because if there was nothing else to do, at least he needed to find out if the dead man that the others saw was the same as the one he had seen at night.

-He is a man, a corpse without rot yet, and sometimes a wolf.- The man spoke, looking at the shadow, then he looked at him again. - My father told me that many spirits live in the forest in the form of animals. But Volfus's is changeable... - And he looked back at the ceiling. -... sometimes he looks like a man, sometimes a wolf. - Draiken's voice suddenly broke, as if he had only now realized that he didn't see the little brother he remembered, but the shadow he had become.

An animal without contours that absorbed the memory of those who had known it. A creature with vague shapes searching for the constant, defined figure, next to which everything else would be just a memory disappeared forever, lost in the cold and acrid breath that flowed from that dead man's mouth.

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From Draiken he learned everything he knew how to teach him, but not what he expected. The revelation of Volfus's burial was being postponed indefinitely. But the urgent need to bury the body to continue with his own life was no longer important. Guilt had taken on the rancid taste of overripe fruits, and every morning he woke up with bitter saliva, like someone who chews his dreams.

Every time he insisted or spoke out on Volfus's behalf, the doctor looked at him reproachfully and then lost himself in memories of him. That's why Zaid didn't ask him again. He knew it was necessary to please him and work for him, while enduring the threats of Volfus' spirit at night.

He learned to know the plants that healed and the signs of illness in people who went to see the doctor. He was coming n old women in pain, twisted and crying children, men with sores. Draiken showed dedication to each one, even if at the end of the day he felt exhausted and had red eyes. He then rubbed his eyelids with dirty hands, because sometimes water was scarce in summer. The gravediggers waited around the cabin, always with that look of wet earth, and when there was a dead person to take away, they loaded them up and left in silence.

During the afternoons, they visited the sick with the cart that an old, heavy ox dragged slowly. People greeted them when they saw them leave the town and enter the meadow. Zaid felt a kind of vertigo as he looked at the empty sky over the plains. He sometimes fell asleep from the rolling of the wheels and dreamed that he was falling upwards, absorbed by the sky that easily merged with the earth on the horizon. It was a yellow meadow of spikes, a blue land with flowers surrounded by fruits like small red suns, white flocks of plant birds that were born from the wind. As far as he could see, there was nothing but amalgamated unfinished reflections of the sun on a huge lagoon of plants. The movement of the leaves was like water turning into air, rising in a mist from the moist earth to feed the insatiable mouth of the clouds.

One morning, the son of one of the oldest families in the region came running.

"Grandma is dying!" he shouted. They set off towards the hut that was more than half a day away. The night had already settled with a moon with golden edges when they arrived.

"The old woman is going to die," the teacher had told her during the trip. "Then I will show you how the humors are spilled from the bodies."

They found the woman on her bunk covered by a goat hair blanket, with her eyes closed and her lips open. The campfire illuminated her face with an unnatural whiteness. Her chest was still moving. Draiken pushed the blanket away from her and saw her dry skin, her body contorted in a spasm of dark ostracism. He tried to bend her legs and arms, but the old woman resisted being moved. Everything that still gave him life had been concentrated in her legs and arms, but her mind was absent and her eyes closed to stimuli. Then he discovered a dirty, fetid wound on one hand.

-A dog bit her a while ago...- said her grandson.

The doctor called Zaid. He made him approach her body to check it as he had taught her. Between them they turned the old woman over. Draiken began to feel his back.

"Here is the humor that gives life to the members," he explained, pointing to the back of the old woman's neck. "When it spills from a wound that does not close at the right time, it is irrecoverable." The framework of the body dries up and atrophies. It is a carcass between the bones, the same thing you saw so many times in corpses. But this time it is rotting due to the bite, that's why I want you to make the cut that I showed you. Then we will cover the wound.

Zaid heated a stiletto over the fire. They made the grandson and the rest of the family leave. Frightened murmurs came from the other room.

"They are superstitious," said the doctor. "They expect spells and concoctions, and if they don't see dancing and writhing, they think that nothing was done to save them." They would be more satisfied with Reynod. But when I left my family and saw the rest of the world, I learned that we are all nothing more than men, rotting flesh and broken bones.

He touched the old woman's body several times while she spoke. He held the diseased hand, and looked at it as if the essence of that humanity, everything the old woman had ever been for even a moment and everything she would later be if she lived, whatever the outcome of that night, was contained. between the doctor's hands. Then Zaid took the stiletto, but his fingers trembled. He jabbed the point into the center of her back, and blood gushed.

-Deeper!- Draiken said.

A thick, foul-smelling liquid flowed quickly and even more abundantly than blood.

"Pick some up," he ordered while he cleaned the wound.

Zaid put a few drops in a jar and Draiken took it away to observe him by the light of the campfire. He studied its consistency and fluidity against the walls of the container.

-Are you still going out?

-Little, and it is redder.

-We have to cover it, that's enough.

-But what is it?

-The humors of the body degenerated by that poorly healed wound.

They then covered the hole with cloth. Draiken ushered the family in. He had to wait until the next day to find out if the grandmother was going to be saved, he told them. They all left, and only the grandson stayed with them.

The light played shadows on the blanket that covered the old woman's body.

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The young people had lain down on the ground with skins that the owners had offered them. Draiken sat next to the sick woman, watching his disciple at the same time. ulo, who moved and complained in his sleep. The grandson woke up.

"Go back to sleep, he always has bad dreams," Draiken murmured. He doubted whether he should wake up Zaid. He did not want to see him suffer, but a feeling that came from his childhood prevented him from doing so; his love for his brother made it difficult for him to feel anything other than indifference to the boy's suffering.

Zaid tossed and turned, peeled off the blankets, and covered himself again a while later. He had skin covered in sweat. He sometimes hit himself, but those blows were soon exhausted, leaving a remnant, a small movement that joined the previous one and formed a shadow with the remains of fear.

Draiken saw, or thought he saw, something like two glowing eyes in a long, thin skull. Even he was sure he saw the flicker, like the flashing light of a firefly hovering over Zaid's sleeping body.

Then he smelled it, and had no doubts. It was the aroma of the wet hair of forest animals. How could a smell like that reach those plains? he asked himself. Only if someone had brought him with him, and there was the boy with that beast inhabiting his body, taking the form of him, stalking him and hiding from him in himself. He imagined Zaid fleeing from that presence in his dreams, confronting him the next moment, brave for once, only to immediately discover that the enemy had already escaped. The young man would never be able to realize in time that the other was hidden in his own eyes, he would never be able to do it before the arrival of morning. He felt sorry for Zaid, but it was the punishment he deserved, he told himself.

The eyes that he had perceived became clearer as the night progressed, and the smell was now stronger although imprecise, perhaps part of an incomplete and fragmented being that had just begun to form, to acquire a body. Then he fell asleep without realizing it, and he thought he had woken up only a while later, but he already glimpsed the faint halo of the sun peeking out at the edge of the field. The fire in the hut had gone out, and the young people were still asleep. The walls were lighter, the sun could barely touch them.

And he could see, first with little clarity, the shape of an animal, a dog that perhaps the family had forgotten with the grandmother. Were those eyes, that smell, yours? The silhouette began to move, without waving its tail, and he seemed to be watching it. But the eyes were not those of a dog, nor was the robust shape of the back, at least not of one that Draiken had seen in that region.

The figure was panting, blurred in shadow. His tongue, dark pink, seemed to lick the remains of the night he was dying. A fear incarnate, ossified, made into eyes and skull. The panic in the body, always condemned to continue growing.

The shadow was advancing towards the bed.

He heard the beast's footsteps. One step after another, stealthy among the crackling of the last logs. He smelled the saliva that fell in threads between his hair and the corners of his mouth.

Draiken touched the old woman, and her extreme coldness shook him. She had been dead for a long time and he hadn't realized it.

The animal was approaching to devour the body.

But before he could even grab something to kill it with, he felt the teeth sinking into his hand. Pain dominated his voice, and he could only give a long cry that woke the others. But they only saw her old woman in her bed,

and her doctor standing next to her, breathing with moans as if he were drowning, and pale as if her blood had left him. They wrapped the hand in bandages, while Draiken looked at them blankly, his eyes open but unseeing. Some family members entered and watched them silently and suspiciously. Zaid helped his teacher out of the hut.

The morning light blinded them. Slowly, Draiken regained his color. He put his head in a bucket of water to clear his head and dried himself off. He placed his gaze, still with traces of panic, on his apprentice, and held him tightly by the shoulders. Then he began to speak to him as he had never done before, in a tone so peculiar that the boy would remember as much as his grandfather's words.

"I'm afraid," he said. "Volfus is no longer my brother, but something else impossible to recognize unless he is dead." Nothing I've learned can explain it. My knowledge is limited, the things that I have believed to be part of life are only the surface of it.-

He leaned close to her ear, brushing her cheek with his beard.

-Today we will go out in search of my brother's grave.- With his lips hurt from having bitten himself in fear all night, he kissed her on the forehead.

"Sorry," he murmured afterwards, and began to cry with his face hidden in his hands, seeking no other support than his tired legs. Shrunken, like the dead old woman in the cabin was.

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They returned to the village for supplies, and left the town in the same cart to which this time two young oxen had been tied.

They were silent. Draiken brooded with his gaze lost at the end of the plain, and Zaid watched him, eager to know what had happened during the night. But he didn't dare ask her.

They passed through fields where the afternoon light glowed almost ocher as the sun set. The oxen's walk was slow and steady, it barely made them feel the passing of the days. At dusk they untied the animals, ate something and slept under the cart.

Two days later, Zaid found the opportunity to speak to him. It was dark, and the clouds were great black mouths reflected in the lagoons.

"What happened at the old woman's house?" He finally dared to ask.

The doctor looked at him for a moment while he dismantled the teams. He seemed worried about deciding what he was going to say or hide.

-When I asked you to come, it was so that you could see that the image that disturbs you at night is the liquid of life converted into a sticky and malleable substance. I thought I was sure that Volfus was nothing more than that. But the other night a wolf attacked me, and the wound on my hand was not made by someone without a body. You are faced with facts that I do not understand and fear. It no longer matters whether he is buried or not, he has gotten a body now.

It took them all autumn to reach the western edge of the Droinne delta. They still had to traverse the labyrinth of hollows and canyons where tributaries made their way between steep rocks and streams. When they found themselves in a flat field, they saw that the rivers had overflowed with the storms of the last winter. All that could be seen was an extensive lake without limits, dotted with mounds of reeds and bushes, some hills of dark earth protruding from the water forming a network of small islands in the distance.

-We will have to go around the flood.

"But it will take us all autumn," Zaid lamented.

-There is no other way. The forest we are looking for is much further east. I haven't been there in so long, you'll have to guide me.

The young man knew, however, that the appearance of the region changed with each rainy season, that the arms and tributaries of the river were different each year. After the volcano erupted, the main bed and beaches had shifted. He couldn't be sure he recognized even the sharpest bend in the riverbed.

"I haven't been back since I was a child," he said, trying to keep his voice from showing concern.

Draiken sighed and made a gesture of resignation.

-Then we are equal.

They decided to sleep early that afternoon to continue clearer the next morning. At night, the air became a heavy mass of water suspended from the sky. Even the wind was hot and unbreathable. They didn't even feel like eating, but they had to so the provisions wouldn't go to waste.

The next day they began to surround the delta as close to the shore as possible. The legs of the oxen sank and became exhausted quickly before nightfall. The clouds had gathered to form a single gray layer that darkened and silvered the horizon, without distinguishing the limit between the sky and the water of the lake.

"When is it going to rain?" Zaid complained, wiping the sweat from his face and looking up.

Some lightning appeared to the north, but they were nothing more than threats of a storm that did not arrive.

"If it rains," said Draiken, "we will sink in the mud."

And Zaid wasn't convinced they could get away with it. The animals seemed dominated by the changes in the air, they were easily exhausted and sometimes a feeling of discomfort, a restlessness seemed to excite them.

Draiken looked back. Some strange footprints in the mud disturbed him. In addition to the oxen footprints, there were other smaller ones. He looked at Zaid swinging on the winch with his eyes closed. Maybe he was sleeping. The strange footprints were forming with each step they took, sometimes right behind them.

"Zaid!" he shouted.

The boy woke up, and the footprints slowed down, slower and farther away.

-Don't fall asleep..., the other one follows us.

Before it finally started to rain, lightning crossed the sky and then a heavy, intense hailstorm fell. They drove the oxen into the forest, but the animals had hardly eaten for three days and were moving slowly under the ice stones. At the end of the afternoon they had to get off the wagon and walk to the nearest tree. What looked like a forest was a group of no more than twenty trees, most of them burned by the lightning they had seen a while before. The branches gave way and broke shortly after. Then they hid as much as possible against the trunks, while a sea of leaves and broken branches fell around them. The tree skeletons could no longer cover them.

It continued to rain with the same intensity throughout the day. Ia. They looked at the oxen, which remained still, tied to the teams. The wheels sank and water flooded the cart. They saw how the earth opened up, they saw the growing gloom that had begun to cover them. They could barely glimpse the limits of the river, which was rising towards them.

The only thing they ate were the wet fruits of the tree and the rainwater. Draiken fell ill four nights later. Roots were being dug up and trunks were breaking. Zaid moved Draiken around as the waters advanced. But there were almost no trees to protect them, and it continued to rain.

The carcasses of oxen stuck out of the mud. The sky retained its pale gray tones. In the high areas, in the hills beyond the delta, hidden in the mist, the green of the grasslands had become a brownish forest of earth, like muddy clouds rising from the ground by the force of the rain.

Draiken opened his eyes. He was still dazed by the illness that made him cough up handfuls of a fetid, yellow liquid, but he didn't stop looking around

with his eyes. The wolf, unscathed under the storm, watched them both: the sick man lying down, and the boy kneeling next to him.

"Don't let him defeat you," the doctor murmured.

Zaid nodded his head, and wanted to reassure his teacher. Draiken's voice was getting weaker.

"We have to finish him," he continued saying, while he held one of Zaid's hands and placed it on his chest. The boy felt the shape of a knife.

-It's my father's and my brother's knife. I dug it up before leaving the Droinne.- He coughed and had to wait a while to recover.- When you have gotten rid of Volfus, you will go look for the old mystic of the south. Montag, they call him. He knows about souls, I only know about bodies.- And his gaze closed.

The wolf was there, suddenly concrete and without the disembodied appearance with which Zaid had seen it in his dreams. When Draiken died, the animal began to approach in the rain, attracted by the wound of the hand once again opened, the flesh tissues converted into a mass of soft waste.

Zaid searched through Draiken's clothes. The dagger was tied to his chest with a rope. He tore the wet cloths with difficulty, and touched the wooden handle. The blade was wrapped in a leather sheath, and he began to untie it.

The wolf was approaching, opening its mouth showing the abyss between its teeth. Zaid continued struggling to remove the rope that he did not want to break. He was no more than an arm's length away when he managed to pull out the knife. He made a quick, blind movement forward, seeing nothing but a confused mass of gray hairs that smelled of rain.

A jet of blood flowed from the animal's jaw and splashed on its face, everything around it took on red hues, even the rain was red, and that brief landscape, he would think later, had been the most beautiful and terrible sign he had seen. in all his life.

Then the blood dissolved into the water that ran down the fur of the wolf, still and panting in front of Zaid. The current of water flowed between the beast's legs, melting to disappear into the mud.

When he wiped his eyes and looked up, the animal was moving away and getting lost in the plain that he had thought was completely flooded. But the shadow of the wolf was confused with the opaque substance of the rain and fog.

Two nights later, it had stopped raining. The dense, stone mass of the sky began to crack, and the sun reappeared between the broken clouds.

He wrapped Draiken's body in a blanket that the master had taken from the wagon before abandoning it, and tied it with braided reed ropes. He tore the clothes and formed ropes which he tied around his waist. He began to drag him taking the path back towards the village. He didn't know if the roads would be clear, but he didn't want to bury him in soft soil so that the next day the body would rot in the sun. He was going to take him to the town to give him a proper burial. He already had, he told himself, a soul stalking him forever, and he did not want another son of Markus over his spirit.

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Zaid took over the doctor's work. They came to see him for the same causes and pains that he had seen Draiken heal, and he accepted them all. Sometimes, the sick came with problems that seemed more like deviations of the soul than of the body, then something arose in his mind when he saw that torrent of pious images in the people's eyes. Images similar to dreams due to their contrast with what reality put in front of them. The looks of the men reflected tragedies, tears, disconsolate moans, and the ancient causes of pain and sorrow appeared stark and cruel. Perhaps that knowledge came to him from his own body, accustomed to the pain of sleep, to persecution, and to the eyes of the dead under a huge moon. white.

Crops had been lost in the flood, and the town had to wait two summers for the land to heal. The dead multiplied due to hunger. The youngest crossed the waters in search of work and food, and when they returned their legs were sore and impeded by severe pain. Births took place earlier in malnourished women, and parents carried their children on their shoulders, thin as dry branches that broke when they laid them on the cot.

But when nothing could be done, as a remedy or simple consolation, he agreed to examine the bodies as if they were still alive, not to solve the irremediable or revive what could not be recovered, but so that the mourners would leave with something in exchange for what they they left Everyone respected him since then.

And many years later, when he grew up and became a man, some women came to live with him. But one day he would throw them out abruptly, dragging them through the mud in front of his cabin. The neighbors never dared to contradict him or reproach him, not even when they saw the wounds on the women's backs in the dust. The words that Zaid pronounced when doing this were as incomprehensible as if they had been said in another language, or came from a dialect as unclassifiable as that of

dreams. Not even the fresh breeze or the morning sun clarified those gestures or their meaning a bit. The next day, the mothers arrived to offer him another of his daughters, because they feared that the fury accumulated in their chaste days would be unleashed on the people and would no longer want to cure them.

One morning, Zaid felt that his body was finally formed. He knew that his bones were strong and his muscles had the necessary rigidity. Looking at himself in the reflection of the water, seeing his face with hard features, the wide neck and the broad shoulders formed from carrying the dead and the sick, he realized that the moment had arrived. Perhaps he would never again be as lucid as he was then, nor feel more committed to the cause that had moved him since he was a child. That event from the past was his entire life, although something else remained hidden beneath the rape and slavery that had been the reason for the outrage, the reason for the crime, the cause of Volfus' eternal restlessness. Not evil or madness, never as variable as the interests of men, nor the will of the gods, who perhaps did not even exist except for catastrophes and tragedies. If not Grandpa Zor's fault, only guilt lived procreating indefinitely. Multiplying like ants on a ripe fruit, becoming air and wind, encompassing everything, infiltrating every crevice of the world's surface. Until she and the earth become a mass of recrimination, of cause and effect without end or possibility of return, without the most remote dream of redemption.

The only way to kill her was to exterminate the other guilt, and like steps erased with each step, the guilt would be lost in her memory. To the origin of the first, the seed of primordial pain, the one that he wounded with the sole argument of his incomprehensible word: the irreversibility of an unforgivable act.

He left the village on a night as dark as the one he had arrived in, but this time no one saw him. The cabin he had inhabited with Draiken was abandoned, and two or three men waited at the door the next morning, unaware that Zaid was gone.

The walk back to the forests of Droinne was faster and less overwhelming than his memories of that long journey made when he was younger. He climbed a hill and looked east, feeling able to glimpse through the rock massifs of the Lost Mountains, what was left of his town.

"Spirits of shame," he said out loud, clasping his hands together and cupping them in front of his mouth. Then he opened them again so that that desire, pronounced and cultivated by the warmth of his breath in his palms, would fly with the wind that blew from the west. - Don't let him return like a sore child. I will not return until I recover my pride.- He left the few things that he had taken with him on the road, and took only the axe.

All that day and the next, he felled trees and prepared the land. Then he built a hut on the bank of the stream. A winter and a spring passed after they had established themselves.

And the following summer, he stood on the threshold one morning, while the remains of the night's dew dripped from the eaves, wetting his feet. He went back inside, dried himself with a blanket, and used another to cover the sleeping woman. He only just realized that he would miss her seeing her dark body breathing so serenely.

He looked for something in all the women he had known, and each one was missing something that should complete the indefinite set of pieces that he called gods. But of all of them, this was the only one that maybe I would miss.

She left the cabin. The sun gradually warmed her body, weak from the intoxication of the night. She stretched with a dull yawn that attracted the dogs. They jumped around her, tails wagging. At the bank of the stream, she knelt to wash her face, and then submerged her entire body. She needed to separate herself from the remains of the dream, from the images of the forest in which the dead danced, from the face of Volfus approaching with the eyes of a wolf.

The dream was big and heavy like a tree grown between his eyes.

The dogs were waiting on the shore and came to lick his feet. The contact with the fresh grass made him relax. That day of hunting would be sunny, and the idea that the sun had risen especially to protect him on his adventure made him happy. Because then he looked similar to the image he remembered of his father.

While he was drying himself, his wife came out of the hut with the milking vessel pressed against her body. The goats jumped in the pen when she entered. She stopped one of her tail, and sat down to milk her, narrowing her eyes as she did so, monotonously. Although it had dawned much earlier, she liked to sleep, and it was difficult to get her to get up with the dawn.

but she is good. Those who told me that black women are faithful are right.

She was looking at him with her lazy smile. He responded with a scolding frown, though he couldn't seem too stern.

He left her to her task and went to the warehouse where she kept the weapons underground. He moved two planks and went into the well. He separated two or three spears to choose the one he would use. He came out

again and sat down to sharpen the points. The metal he had brought from the village was strong, and when sharpened, the shine looked impressive.

My father was right when he said that the witcher kept us isolated. If he saw these materials from the men of the East

The morning sun reflected on his spears, blinding him as he turned them in his hands. He looked up and saw Tahia looking at him with a motherly expression of pity. Zaid didn't know whether to get angry or laugh at such a look. He narrowed his eyes, a disdainful twist on his lips. She lowered her eyelids quickly, and left, carrying the vessel on one of her shoulders.

"I won't feel sorry when I do what I must," Zaid said to himself in a low voice.

He returned to the hut and left the chosen spear under his eaves. He went to where Tahia was, on her back and crouched in front of the fire. Zaid approached her and began to caress her to enter her woman's body as someone, a long time before, had entered his when he was a child. And like every time he remembered and compared both moments, he felt nothing more than an absent pain of anguish, as if that old pain had fled transformed into liquid, into pure white secretions flowing from her body.

Tahia did not reject him, but feeling hurt she made an involuntary movement to move away from her. Zaid got angry. He tried to approach her again, caressing her breasts this time gently.

"The most beautiful," he whispered in her ear. - The most beautiful I've ever had. -And it was enough to overcome her resistance. On the woman's dark back, Zaid's white hands looked like five-pointed stars against a summer sky. The heat that came from her effort to hold it mixed with the heat of the flames, a pale fire against the light of that bright morning. He held her in her arms for a long time, feeling how she was fading away. But Tahia's eyelids were still open, and her eyes attentive. They seemed to be absorbing her thoughts.

I'm going to do it

He ran his kisses down Tahia's neck.

after possessing it. Her mouth alters my spirit and disturbs the gods

Later, when the sweat, the moans and the friction of one skin against the other had disappeared, everything seemed to have been done, except the only important thing.

well, what bothered me is no longer there, the mercy of that look he gave me, my response to his commiseration

He separated from Tahia to approach the fire. He sat and watched her get up again, with that graceful laziness that always made him smile.

"The oil," he ordered. He watched her go in search of her, return to her side, and remove the lid from her container. The aroma of the earth, the hum of the wind that brushed the leaves against each other like lovers surrendered to the timeless darkness of the night, filled the warm air of the cabin.

Zaid lay back, and Tahia poured the thick, warm oil over her skin. She spread it with her fingertips in every sector and fold of the man who had adopted her. The one who gave her a home, a fire, and the precious shelter even warmer than the campfire, her own body to cover her. The same one that she now spread as a sign of preparation and farewell. She ran her hands over the ten The fragility of each muscle, the strength that was increasing until it made him a tree, a rock and a moving stone.

Zaid appreciated those hands that he would soon no longer see. They were an absence in his own presence, something that was there and was not there. Time tended to confuse him sometimes, making him think about the future as if it were his present.

He was going to miss her.

Look at the dark skin, softly covered by the hair of the neck, the armpits, the sex hidden in the shadows of the thighs. He would miss her, and he wondered where the courage of which he had until then been proud had gone. Because only great courage was essential to stick the knife into that smooth flesh, looking into her eyes, knowing that she, passively, voluntarily and resignedly, would give herself to him as always, once again, in all of her. Her entire body was his, her arms and hands opening and closing in spasms of pleasure, her legs twisted, her eyelids half open to see the nothingness behind him, as he possessed her.

When she finished with the oil, he walked away from her in search of the paints that had been waiting since the night before to thicken in the cold. Zaid rested in the beam of the sun that he had managed to enter. The cool breeze gave him chills. She looked at his body, shiny. He closed his eyes and fell asleep for a few moments remembering the words that Tahia had said to him when she met him: “My beautiful Lord.”

-Tahia!

She appeared peering from the door.

- Where were you?

-Looking at the dogs. When you return, one of the females will have a baby.

She motioned for him to sit on her lap.

-Woman, what I am going to do in the forest has no possibility of return, and I need the support of the gods and all the magic and powers that I can

obtain the favor of. Your duty is to promise me that you will be faithful to me while I am away.

She hugged him immediately and cried.

-These tears promise nothing. Even if you say it, your word is that of a woman, inconstant and vulnerable.- Zaid separated her face from his. Tahia continued crying, and suddenly she began to look at him no longer with fear, but with an expression more similar to resentment.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. - You were never nor did I promise you that you would be more than those dogs, when I brought you to my house.

The animals waited sitting in the shade, outside the hut, and wagged their tails when they heard their name. She looked at them, and they reacted with barking. She turned away from Zaid, brought the paintings and knelt next to him.

"I didn't mean to make you angry," she said, looking down.

Zaid stroked her hair, as he did with her animals, and upon noticing her, she jerked his hand away from her.

do not soften my soul, mercy

your beautiful house must stay far away, mercy

far from my dark soul, which gives you no room or comfort

Zaid, grandson of Zor the Betrayer, Zaid the humiliated, the spirit hunter

He stood in front of Tahia so she could start painting him. She first smeared a dark gray patina until it covered her entire body, making it look like a cloudy sky. Then she drew short, white stripes and small circles with the pads of her fingers. Taia's nails made him feel faint pricks and tickles that made her laugh, then she looked up at him and smiled.

Zaid looked at his arms and hands, legs and thighs. The oils darkened as they dried, and finally took on an opaque tone of gray tinged with black spots. It had the appearance of a wolf's fur.

He only had his face left, but the ritual paintings restored his memory of the flesh, and he remembered the witcher on the day of circumcision. His body contracted and he rested a hand on her sex.

Tahia moved away from her, but immediately her eyes softened. Zaid knelt in front of her. His face had contorted, waiting for the pain to go away, and as he disappeared, he saw her wife and her pitying eyes. He was ashamed.

He hated the one who looked at him with that maternal gesture of pity.

Then the strength for the great act came from that place, at the exact moment.

He felt his teeth clench in fury, and his mouth uttered words he did not want to say.

-Do not look at me like that! I will force you to be faithful, female dog, female beast!-And he grabbed the knife that was on the table.

He could see Tahia's gaze, her open arms, her hands flailing, and then nothing.

Only the blood.

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He ran a finger of his right hand over the blood. With that finger, he rubbed his forehead from the base of her hair to one eyebrow. He stopped, closed his eyes, and painted his eyelid with the same red line. Then he opened it again, continuing over her cheek to the corner of her mouth.

He smudged her finger again, tracing the line along the outside edge of her chin. Then all along her neck.

It was the line of bravery.

With one finger of his left hand, he repeated the process on the right side of your face. Forehead, eyebrow, eyes open and closed and open again, eyelid, cheek, lips, chin and neck.

It was the line of skill.

She dipped her thumbs into the large red puddle that had formed under Tahia's back. With her fingertips, she made a new line from the center of the forehead over the nose and upper lip. She closed her mouth, ran his fingers over her lips. The line continued down the center of her chin and throat, to the central depression of her neck.

The third was the line of the gods.

He now he was ready. He removed Markus's knife from where he had buried it in the cabin floor, under the cot where Tahia slept. He unwrapped it and began to clean the dirty handle of moisture and dirt. The edge was still effective, but he set about improving it a little more over the fire.

The light entered with the signs of the early hours of the afternoon. On the threshold, the dogs were looking at him. Every movement of Zaid became a blink, a waving of tails and ears, a bristling of the back, a moan, a

dilation of the beasts' pupils. From time to time they sniffed the smell that came from the corpse, cowering in a corner and surrounded by the dark puddle that was both a cradle and a shroud.

The flames licked the edge of the bone, leaving dark spots on the surface. He tested it on his own finger, and a thin red groove emerged. It must have been the same blade that many times cut old Markus' dead foot.

"Good," he said out loud, directing his gaze toward the animals. "I'm ready."

They rose to surround him, heads held high. The eyes were attentive to the slightest sign that Zaid's face expressed, the ears raised and attentive, the jaws flowing with saliva. Since he had decided to take them to catch the wolf, he had left them without food since the previous day, and along the way he would fatten them with fat, just enough to keep them strong and hungry at the same time.

Before leaving, he wrapped Tahia's body in some cloth that Draiken had taught him to prepare to keep corpses. He wanted his wife's beautiful body not to be completely lost. That underground deposit also gave it the right climate to keep it away from insects and worms. There he would wait, he told himself, on the day of his return.

The dogs watched him as he dropped the planks, the noise frightening the birds from the neighboring trees who fled in flocks. Then he covered the entrance with dirt and rocks. He tied the dagger with a rope around his body and practiced drawing it with his right hand several times. He looked towards the forests of his childhood, as if he could already see them despite the distance, and began walking towards the east.

At dusk, the dogs preceded him on the road, barking, attentive and compliant in the task of warning, whoever wanted to listen or not, that his master was passing through that region. Zaid seemed to sway as he walked. He alternated the pace of his legs with the broad, blunt end of the spear as a staff. He walked with his head down, looking at the ground and the clods of the road. But he was not looking at that, but at another place and another time to come, the planned strategy, the movements and maneuvers for the success of the hunt. Later, only then, would he imagine the reward of peace, in what dreams would be like without nightmares, the great absence and the golden emptiness of his face gone forever. And that feeling was transmitted to him by the sky at dusk. His own shadow, projected to the east, seemed like an arrowhead marking the path to follow. The sign that the gods gave him. The shadow thinned, until it became a black line accompanied by others, those of the trees and the dogs, of the few birds that crossed the silhouette of the setting sun. The road was lost in the mists. The fireflies were shining right before his eyes, as the dogs jumped to catch them. Swarms of grasshoppers, hundreds at that time of summer, passed over the trees and some landed on their shoulders.

There were still many streams and rivers to cross, a great distance separating him from the eastern forest of the Lost Mountains. The night stopped him and he fell asleep. The dogs lay down, ears pricked and attentive. Zaid was able to sleep peacefully.

He woke up to a loud flutter of birds flying north. The trees were more abundant and the vegetation was transforming. The bushes of the delta gave way to tall grasses and ground-level vines. Then, when the rock masses were so close that he had to raise his head to see the top, trees of reddish, yellow and light green tones appeared. The steep-sided forest had begun, the periphery at least, giving hints of what could be found in the hollows and hills between the mountains. Towards the south, a series of nu two giants led to the distant area where the mountains were always snowy.

She knew he wasn't going to find the wolves yet. The hiding places were surely in hidden places among the fir trees and their tangle of roots. She continued walking while the dogs went ahead to explore the origin of the smells that only they perceived. They were going to be the first to discover the wolf's refuge under his nose, he knew it.

He spent the afternoon with a single important fact, the walk and the thought, two separate planes of the same anxiety and growing doubt: the way to face what until then had been an ungraspable image. He also came the night, and the next day, and the night and three more moons and suns.

The forest was condensing into a shadow sheltered by the mountains, the cracks in the earth made protuberances, scars covered with plants that grew where barely a handful of earth was able to settle between the stones. Moats with hedges of cherry trees red like blood stains, groves of peach trees whose fruits he collected as a provision. But the dogs drank very little water from the streams. Something impelled them to reject it.

A rainy day came, and the spiders and snakes came out of their hiding places. Zaid watched the branches and the ground. In the afternoon, the dogs had started barking around a viper peeking out of the ivy. But before Zaid could kill her, one of the dogs had been bitten. The others moved away and the snake scurried through the leaves.

The injured dog had sat down to lick his wound. The dog's life was extinguished. The shine in his eyes slowly faded. The others looked at him, silent, with their tails lowered. The dog tried to stay upright, but his legs gave out, and he fell on his side. His eyes remained open for a while, the features of his face became swollen and deformed. He opened his mouth one last time, and let his foamy tongue fall out. He had two choking attacks before he died.

Zaid picked him up and walked to a big tree. He began to dig a small pit between the roots that protruded from the ground. The other dogs

approached him and helped him dig with his paws. He looked at them, and then left the body in the grave.

When they continued on their way, this time the animals were no longer running. They accompanied him at the same pace, saddened, and perhaps also thinking, as he did.

A few days later, the anxiety of hunger replaced the dogs' previous mood. They had eaten nothing but fat and drank a little water with reluctance. Zaid feared for his own safety, but he was too close to the goal to make the mistake of feeding them and taking their fury away. The paths through the conifers were steeper, with small waterfalls marking clearings on the slopes. From time to time, they discovered squirrel or badger dens from which he had to scare the dogs away with threats.

One afternoon the animals stopped, sniffed the air for a long time, and began to howl. The hair on their backs stood up and their tails tensed. They barked in a circle around a shelter behind some fallen trees. Some began to dig, others jumped on top of the trunks, or lay down on their front legs, crouching and still barking.

Zaid knew that they had finally found him. It was dark, and the red paint on his face shone with the reflection of twilight through the foliage, the dogs' eyes also flashing in the incipient gloom.

The wolf's face was peering out at the entrance to the cave, looking at him suspiciously. The dogs continued barking at him, but he was not frightened by them. He looked only at the one who had come to look for him, and instead of returning to his shelter, he fled up the slope. He dared him to follow him.

Zaid was not going to snub him. He would pursue him wherever he went to finish what he had started a long time ago, as firm in his memory as a footprint in lava. The origin of the tragedy that had brought them together the day they boarded the same raft.

He ran after the animal, following the dogs. The beast jumped over rocks and logs, changing direction quickly. Sweat ran down Zaid's forehead, and his throat was dry in the wind. He began to feel his legs go numb on the rising ground. The pebbles made him slip, and he fell to his knees several times.

The wolf fled without confronting him. The tail of thick hair, the sparkling eyes as he turned his head to see his pursuer, images that dissolved with the weak flashes of afternoon light between the branches. Until he couldn't see it anymore. All the rest of the day he was looking for it, afraid of being surprised around every path or behind every tree.

He kept a weak campfire through the night, barely enough to illuminate himself. He wasn't tired. The per The men sat around him, attentive as always to the night sounds. One of them suddenly raised his head and jumped into the darkness beyond the fire. Others followed him.

"Stay!" he shouted, and he was able to stop at least the last ones, who stayed within the halo of light, listening to the moans from the darkness, the sound of torn skin, the shaking of the bushes with the clash of the bodies united in a fight that sounded like a dance. The animals, excited at the exact limit of the light, could barely contain themselves from running. Zaid tried to calm them down, because he was determined not to intervene. He knew the other dogs wouldn't come back, and he didn't want to lose the only ones he had left too.

In the morning, he buried the bodies and continued heading east onto a less leafy plateau, warmed by a serene sun. The other animals in the forest seemed to know that he was not looking for them. The foxes watched him pass from their burrows, and the deer watched him without escaping.

Tiredness was beginning to take over, but it was more sadness than fatigue. He rubbed his eyes. A throbbing headache made him seek the shade of an oak tree. He broke some acorns between his fingers to inhale the aroma. The sun's rays fell with long arrows, and he saw the specks of dust, the seeds that followed the direction of the breeze. He thought continuously, unable to stop, and that was his downfall. The thought brought with it misfortune and memory.

Thinking should not be for men, but we are made of its substance

He had stayed still, face down and with his eyes closed, feeling the hum of pain in his head. He heard the snap of a branch, but it was too late to react. He felt deep scratches on his back, and the burning was so intense that it made him fall to the ground, while he saw how the dogs had come out to defend him and were fighting with the wolf, which now seemed bigger, like a man on all fours.

The dogs were fighting at a disadvantage. Two were badly injured and stood still on the side. The wolf then suddenly fled, not because he had not had the opportunity to finish them off at once, but because of that inexplicable cause that made him reserve his strength, measure it, to dominate Zaid with firm and sporadic massacres.

While the dogs licked their wounds, he, lying there, felt like little Zaid on the raft again, defeated and face down, watching the world pass by behind him. His skin burned in a way he never imagined scratches from claws could hurt, no matter how strong they were. He reproached himself again and again for his mistake, his unacceptable mistake, and he felt like crying. The dogs were howling.

He decided to get up, slowly.

He managed to stand, and with the spear he sacrificed the suffering animals. The others looked at him for a moment, and sat down to rest. That night, he prepared a cure of fresh herbs. He lay on his back on the leaves smeared with it. His eyelids closed as he looked at the treetops swaying in the wind. His crickets chirped under the red reflections of the moon on the leaves of the oaks. He couldn't move much, and he didn't even try to do so as he sensed that the wolf was watching him, hiding somewhere behind the trunks, while the sound of the wind accompanied his raucous howling. That song sent a chill down his wounded back, but it was as beautiful and as cruel as the form of the soul to which he belonged. He was almost certain that he wasn't going to attack him that night. It was probably another method that the wolf had chosen to exterminate him.

The dogs were afraid, and they lay down next to Zaid. He felt the trembling of their bodies huddled against him, but he wasn't going to call them cowards. Fear was a great teacher.

When dawn broke, he went to wash in the stream and found the corpse of another of the dogs. There were only two left. His back had eased enough to continue, and he set off. As he walked, his skin seemed stiff like a rope binding his shoulders. The animals walked beside him, heads down, the hunger to which he had subjected them was less strong than the fear.

They are nothing more than small beasts, while the other has the mind of a man, and acts according to the measure of his cruelty, but why think so much?

define, name, act and lose accordingly.

The loss from the first sprout and conception of the most basic thought.

Thinking to lose, and losing to dedicate one's life to thinking.

Being born hopelessly unsuccessful. He felt the wolf's footsteps. He stopped, and the footsteps did too. He moved forward and they restarted. The dogs seemed sleepy, they continued walking without paying attention to anything other than their own pain. Zaid held the handle of the knife tightly, ready to die with his hand there, even if the dagger would never make it out of his sheath. Willing to be buried that way, if there had been someone to take care of it.

With his other hand on the spear, he looked around. He listened to the footsteps and rustling in the leaves, the wind on the wolf's fur, the rustle of thick hair. He could hear it, and it was strange, as if he came from another world where the backs of wolves had been made of a nobler material than the skin of mere mortal beasts.

And the attack came from the sky, from the branches suspended above him. Branches strong enough to support the weight of a large wolf, but not to withstand the momentum of his jump. The wood broke when he jumped and fell, breaking the spear. Zaid had the animal on top of him, thick, hard fur covering his face. His claws latched onto his shoulders and sank into the flesh. His hind legs rested on it. The wolf's chest was in his face. His left arm had no strength and his shoulder had gone numb.

The wolf reached for his neck.

Zaid could stop the wolf's mouth with his right arm for a very short time. He tried to get rid of the blood, dirt, and body on top of him by shaking his head. Gradually, his left hand became more sensitive and his fingers woke up. In a moment the two were lying on their sides, and he put his elbow to put his hand between his chest and the wolf's belly. He reached for the dagger, and plunged it into the body.

The wolf shuddered and bit the air, bit himself where he had been wounded, and rolled on the ground. But he couldn't get up again. His eyes were no longer looking at him. He fell in the dust, and handfuls of dark blood gushed from his mouth.

Zaid was watching him while he was dying. After one last tremor, the beast did not move again. He approached, smelling saliva and blood as if these were the essential elements of the forest. He looked curiously at the eyelids still raised, the eyes restless. But no sign of life seemed to resist. Then, without explaining why, without even thinking about it, he knelt next to the wolf, placed a hand on its fur, caressed it and kissed it.

The dogs approached him, but this time there was no fear or submission. Zaid moved away from the wolf and wanted to reward them with a caress, but they growled at him. They did not look at him with the fury of hunger, as he thought at first. They were not observing him as animals do, but as men do.

-Go away! "They are free!" He shouted at them.

But they didn't leave. The dogs' eyes spoke.

Volfus's voice was in them.

Gods, do not tempt me with that uncertain thing called hope. Do not ask me to believe in what I see of the sky or the earth, in the water I will drink, in the green that my eyes will see, or the herbs that will feed me. Do not expect me to trust in the joy of women, the words of men, in the shadow of the birds or the clouds that will ever protect me, nor in the trees that will shelter me.

I will no longer trust, even if I desperately want to, not even in myself. There is no greater concern than waiting for redemption. When there is nothing but failure marked by the law of birth, the nature of the body in every region of skin and bone, when nothing that can be done will change the origin, and every act is useless, then there is no reason to believe.

Hope is born from ignorance, from the naive desire of the soul to see a truth in an act, a fact that will never be fulfilled just by trusting.

We walk through the world under the dominion of the gods, their will that is pure uncertainty. Catastrophes are the background of human tragedies.

Time is the only divinity that recreates us every day in the light of the sun. It forms us with mud, water and salt. We find ourselves in the middle of the forest equipped with a body and a world that we believe we have, but nothing could be more wrong. Guilt waits there, at the beginning and end of the road, or watching us from the darkness between the trees. Sometimes we even think that he has been distracted, but they are narrow moments, finely cut in the thickness of time, in which we are happy because we do not know the truth.

This is our state. Exchange of ideas in the form of beliefs, and with each broken idea an insensitive, painless scar is produced, pink not because of the new thing, but because of the fragility of its seed.

Will I have to walk back to the place of my birth or my destination? Although in different places, it is the same. What does it matter where I go, if the bearers of the weight of my soul accompany me with the random figure of two s animals. I look at them, and they look at me. They speak? Yes, I say to myself. Have the inhabitants of death ever stopped talking to us, telling us about their pain, making us remember death and the time we lack?

Therefore, Gods, I beg you for the last time in my life, and I declare in this way my resignation to You, that you forget me forever.

I already have company.

Zaid turned his back on the rising sun and walked away from the lake, where the waters moved with the splashing of hundreds of ducks. A death rattle came from the wind-swayed fir trees, those remnants of the wind whose precocious old age took refuge in the forests. And a stinking aroma came from there, to mix with the fresh morning air.

The dogs flanked him. Their faces were dry, indifferent. They no longer moved their tails as before when following him, and their ears were held high all the time.

The way back was too painful. A thin shadow of sadness had formed in front of Zaid's eyes. The sphere of the sun diminished: the green was darker, the black earth more similar to emptiness, the sky heavier. He looked at his hands, and the blood was there, dried, forming clumps of rough consistency. He felt as if he were carrying on his head the entire weight of a god, whose curse he could not get rid of until that same deity decided. Neither fleeing, nor killing, nor killing oneself seemed enough to him.

Why add another specter to the sky of rebellious spirits, in search of what not even they know. I will endure until I can no longer, and from that point I will continue to tolerate the weight that my body will have at that finished moment. There is always another force for each attack. And the gods know it. Such is the terror. They know and act for our ignominy.

He thought of Tahia. He would return for her body to give her back the life he had needlessly taken from her. The same vitality that now stood beside him in the form of dogs, beneath the face of domesticity. Two wild half-human spirits. Parts of the same man that he would not dare to eliminate again, if he did not want to cover the world with that race of messengers of the dead.

The image of his woman was captured in his eyes, behind the membrane of fog and sorrow. The image of a sun of efforts and feats that would help him return home, to Tahia's body deposited in a hole in the ground.

He crossed towns following paths he did not remember having traveled before. The women stopped to look at him suspiciously, clutching their small children to their skirts, as if they were saving them from the rot and stench that this man, disheveled and dirty, seemed to spread with his passing. It was a beggar flanked by two dogs, which, unlike following him, seemed to be guarding him, perhaps watching over him. Even the appearance of the animals was better than that of man, more upright and less dirty, with a serene and upright look. The dogs sometimes looked to the sides, at the people. But the residents moved away when they sensed an ancient aroma of unknown origin.

Zaid wore threadbare cloth over his skin still stained by ritual paint. Despite the sweat and blood of the fight with the wolf, the rain and streams he had crossed, the hunter's mark was still part of his body. The wolf's scratches and the three lines on his face were still there, attenuated by time, on the skin that reproduced like an independent being, a wayward and always vital animal. The same as his beard and his nails would continue to grow after death. And that word was what the eyes of the men and women who watched him shouted, the certainty that he had always been like this, with his current appearance, his age, his crooked walk, the look of immense sorrow, and the strange company. who escorted him.

What the others certainly could not sense was the presence of the dagger under the clothes, the relief of the bone on the chest. A bone sculpted to kill other bones that are still alive, a tangle of stone worms assembling the structure of the weapon. An unfaithful brother, who because of his beauty, was repeatedly forgiven. That's why Zaid carried him on top of him, and his own skeleton seemed to consent to it.

Only from time to time he looked up from the clods and stones of the path he was following. Either way he was going to get there, the dogs would

take care of that. He saw a man sitting on a rock at the exit of the last village he had passed through.

"Do you want to eat something, beggar?" the man asked him, stirring the embers over which a leg of lamb was roasting.

Zaid looked at him, then at the food. The dogs licked their lips and threads of saliva fell from their mouths.

"Only for them," he replied.

The man frowned when he saw them, suddenly grumpy and regretful of his offer.

-No! Neither to them nor to you! Now that I see it better, that blood on his hands is from a a recent hunt. Go, go soon!

Zaid looked at his palms. His blood was thinning again. He observed the animals, and noticed them larger in front of the food, whose aroma filled the air until turning the entire place into the sole and only object of hunger to satisfy. After looking into the dogs' eyes and nodding, he felt the loneliness of the path at that hour of twilight, the few lights of the village and the absolute silence of the birds, the wind suspended between the branches. The remains of the sun already hidden, the moon indecisive and the sky the color of a dead child's nails.

Zaid opened the ruined cloth that covered his chest and touched the dagger. The sheath that wrapped it was as fragile as a woman's hands. The knife came out easily into the cold, acrid evening air. He seemed to take on a special shine, like a smile drawn on the edge under the reflection of the moon.

The hand with the gun moved in a brief dance, and the seated man did not even appreciate the dance that preceded his death.

Like an animal without control.

He thought about that, as the man's flesh lay scattered and half-eaten by the dogs and him.

After he had satisfied his hunger, surrounded by the crackling of the fire and the rattling of the bones between the dogs' teeth, he felt better. Less weak, although without knowing at the expense of what part of his spirit.

In the morning, they were gone. The place had been strewn with bones with smelly flesh, ashes and blood on the ground moistened with dew.

The inhabitants of the village, as they went to the fields, commented on the noises and howls they had heard during the night. But they did not dare

to move a single object from that place. They let the dawn slowly illuminate the path and the vestiges of the night. An uneasiness took shape in the cold air, and a dense fog prevailed throughout the day, despite the sun. It took many days for the shadow to dissipate. Children and old people went to contemplate it in their free time. The men met when they returned from the fields to discuss what to do, undecided and afraid to approach the place.

And seven days later, the fog subsided enough for the villagers to decide to get rid of the bones. They spent a whole day burying the remains, and went home to clean that smell from their hands. But for some time they avoided stepping on the disturbed earth, making a brief detour along the way.

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When he arrived at the cabin where he had lived with Tahia, it was so quiet that even the stream seemed to flow much more slowly. The sun was shining brightly, but a kind of filter attenuated the light and formed a hurtful reflection in Zaid's eyes. He thought of Tahia, of her body wrapped in the oil that, he hoped, had kept her unscathed.

The dogs sat in front of the cabin, but he did not dare to enter. He went straight towards the warehouse under the ground. The winds, rain and abandonment had raised mounds of earth and made plants grow around them. The entrance was blocked and the way was forced through with an axe.

He lifted the lid. The rats came out and hid in the vegetation. A dead smell was released into the afternoon air, rose to Zaid's face and dispersed. The dogs raised their noses, shook their tails, and barked.

Zaid covered his mouth with a cloth and entered the darkness. The silence was expected, he told himself, but not that phosphorescence in the corner where he had left the body. It was an opaque glow, almost defeated by the dense blackness that surrounded it, but firm and constant.

The glow of the dead.

His memory began to recite the psalmody of the funeral ritual of his people.

The glow of the dead will last forever.

The imperishable brilliance of the unburied.

But he knew that this time he was not repeating words, but creating a new sentence. He approached, stepping on the rocks, the old branches, the

hardened rat feces. He stretched out a hand searching for the body. And touching him, certain of his harmless decrepitude, he lifted him up in his arms.

A multitude of ants sprouted from the fabrics. He cut the ties that he himself had tied, separated the blankets and revealed Tahia's shrunken body, in the position before her birth, that position that was also the most convenient or pleasant in which to die. Despite the time, the body remained intact. The eyelids were not sunken. The skin was still healthy, the hair was longer, the hair on the arms and sex was more abundant, the nails had also grown. The hands continued on the chest, hiding the breasts, hard as spines of black earth.

He went to the cabin in search of the winter furs. He replaced the cloths, moving Tahia as if she were changing a sleeping child. He left his face uncovered, he wouldn't dare touch his eyes. Then he tied two straps to his shoulders, or then two in front of the chest in the shape of a cross, and one more around the neck. Tahia's body was now tied to her back.

The dogs follow us with the eyes of a man not yet sentenced.

My burden and me.

The rigid body behind my back, with those closed eyes watching the kingdom from which they come to disturb me. To live my life more than myself, occupying it. Being the essence of memory, a single mind of innumerable names.

Be one and all.

Be sky, and concave earth, cold darkness.

The clouds devouring my shadow. Without light the shadow hides.

And that will be the only true and strangest thing in the world.

The journey in search of the man they called “the mystic” took him to the Southern Mountains. Travelers said that they were places so frozen that even the gods could only establish temporary abodes.

They left behind the thickets of the delta, then the shadowed pine forests, the meadows of dark and purple grass. The trees became scarce, with small branches and leaves. The ground was stony, covered with hardened snow. The hills dotted the path with hills and hollows that heralded the first mountains. The sky had filled with dense clouds over the mountains.

One day he contemplated the extension of the territories left behind, the flight of the birds that flew over the forests, getting lost in the mist that consumed everything.

This is how the gods must feel when they see the world as clay in their hands.

The dogs did not show fatigue. He had refused to feed them, so every other day they disappeared in search of prey. But they always came back. From somewhere along the way, they appeared to escort him. Even if he strayed, even if he blended into the plants where there was no possibility of making his way, they ended up finding him.

And the narrow and peculiar group of non-human humans, of animals without the quality of beasts, entered the paths of the slopes of the high mountains. It was not his destiny to climb to the peaks, but to find the caves, the warm beds of the inhabitants who, according to him he had heard, were as long-lived as the imprecise years of the moon.

The wind grew stronger until it became sharp, frozen whistles. The snow had the weight of small white stones. He found shelter between a rock wall and a barrier of dead logs. The sky was getting dark. The clouds dissolved and re-formed in the shape of enormous inverted mountains.

The dogs walked slowly, with grim and fearful looks. A concern made them move their eyes and ears in permanent attention, as if they saw something that Zaid could not yet perceive.

-What is it, what's happening? -he asked them.

Then an old man appeared from behind a white rock polished by the wind, and when he saw them in front, he covered his eyes. He had the same expression he had noticed on Draiken.

-What was the god that punished you in this way, son? - said the man more with melancholic sadness than with fear.

Zaid was relieved to hear that earthy voice calling him “son.” He was already tired of the impersonal and perfect voices of the dead. But the old man reminded his grandfather Zor of him. He removed his hands from the straps and covered his face.

The grandfather who told me about the dead for the first time, and I couldn't understand him. Maybe he saw in my childhood, around me, the shadow that accompanies me.

And a fury that wants to come out, but today it has dissolved in the water of my body.

The old man looked at him.

-What is he seeing? -Zaid wanted to know, anxious about the change of mood of his spirits.

-They suffer. They are looking at the mountains, at the wind that carries life from one place to another.

Then the old man looked at the dogs. Zaid came forward to answer him.

-There are two and they represent one. Perhaps you can see the original form of the one who follows me.

But the old man hesitated, as if he didn't know how to begin.

-No one deserves such a burden on their shoulders, my son.- He raised his arms to form the base of a large circle in which he intended to encompass a world.- It is a huge crown of scared faces that cry. It is a tree with a luxuriance similar to that of the sky between two peaks. They're surrounding you everywhere, they're touching you, they're kissing you! Could it be that you don't realize?

The old man panted with one hand on his chest.

-Only once before did I see something similar, in someone even younger. But I want you to enter my refuge, and I will tell you everything when you have rested.

He leaned on Zaid's shoulder, touched Tahia's corpse, and walked away again.

"I'm afraid of you," he said, but he approached again and this time grabbed him by the hand.

The darkness of the cave took a while to dissipate before the eyes hurt by the reflection of the snow. None of this mattered to Zaid at that moment, he just wanted to sleep in a dreamless sleep. He dropped, and he didn't know anything a of life until he woke up two days later.

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While he slept, old Montag watched the dogs hovering around his owner. They had rejected food, and even rest itself, as distractions from the great threat they felt upon them. They howled and ran from the entrance of the cave to the darkness below.

The spirits had hidden themselves against the ceiling. Their changing and imprecise shapes seemed attached to the rocks, and the bats that nested there flew away. But the dead were trapped. And he, Montag, trapped with them. He knew they rejected him.

He untied the corpse from Zaid's back, and put it in a corner. He was not afraid, unlike what he had felt in front of the other beings that arrived with the boy. It was only a motionless body, the only one, perhaps, that really slept in the unbreakable retreat of his spirit. He wasn't curious, either, to know who it was.

For two days he prepared food, meditated, and did his daily tasks, trying to keep his visitor protected with the fire always lit and furs to keep him warm.

When Zaid woke up, he rubbed his face and looked around. Then he smiled at the old man.

-I don't think you slept well.

-It was enough if I think about other nights I've spent. But I'm dirty and hungry.

He knew he was an intruder and was ashamed of his pretensions.

"Don't worry," the old man said, he helped him get up and they left.

The morning was cool. Montag led him to a waterfall near the cave, the water falling into a sun-warmed hollow. Zaid went naked into the lagoon and began to tremble. However, his body finally woke up, free of the clothes that had dressed him during the trip. He rubbed his face, his long beard and his numb muscles. His eyelids were covered with a crust of blood that came off with difficulty.

Montag watched him from the shore, and he thought. The young man's back was defeated by the burden of the corpse, and he was making efforts to straighten himself with the gentle influence of the water. The paints on his skin, gray spots that simulated the fur of wolves, caught his attention.

"I think I could stay here forever," Zaid said, closing his eyes as the water ran down his face.

Montag handed him a knife, and the boy began to cut his beard. He also cut his hair and then lay in the sun.

-Without wind, this place must be the best to live...

-You could do it, if that is your wish.

Zaid stopped looking at the peaks and said to the old man:

-If you are Montag, the mystic, you know that's not what I came for.

-Yes I am, but even if I'm old I don't know everything. I'm just saying that your will directs you, son. "That's the only thing that matters when everything else is dead." He handed her some tightly woven clothes.

-When you're ready, I'll wait for you inside to eat.

Zaid returned to the cave and the dogs growled at him, then forgot about him and continued wandering around inside. He then looked up at the ceiling, where the frightened shadows had taken refuge.

- For the first time they have left me alone, and I had not noticed their absence. They were already like my shadow, like the nails on my fingers...

-And the meat you ate, the air you breathed- the old man accompanied him in his lament. - Now you must sit down to eat, and I will tell you how I got to these mountains.

“I come from the North, beyond the great Sea, which when calm seems like a blanket of dry leaves, but is also a raging beast that lashes ships and souls. Yes, I know. It's not easy to imagine. You only have to think of a huge shell of any fruit, capable of carrying many men through the waters, and that the gods blow, raising waves that attack the boats. Thus days pass that cannot be counted, until the sun rises again and the only thing important is to remain on the deck, no longer distinguishing the sky from the sea, with tanned and rejuvenated skin. But inside, in this place that we don't control - Montag hit his chest - you know that nothing will be the same since then. “The sea changes everything, even the vision that one has of one’s own life.”

Montag sighed and looked down.

“I left my family in the Northern Village, the prosperous town where I grew up and where my children were born. I did it because something forced me. A desire, I thought at that moment, to live without the constant anxiety of the will of the sea. There the sea is what decides and rules. A monster that attracts us so irresistibly that our entire life becomes water, fish and barges. That's during the summer, when it's light and we can fish. In the dark seasons, we spend the winters in the shipyards building ships that will carry them, travelers and merchants, to distant regions.

“When I left my town I was already a grown man. Not old, but my children were married and one of them os was preparing to be a member of the Council of Priests. He was the only one to go say goodbye to me at the port. My wife decided to forget me forever, and what could I do, if she had that anxiety bubbling in my body, tickling me inside. She felt more desire, I can assure you, to run, to build, to meet women and drink, even to fly if she could, or to swim against the sea, than when she was young. I saw the endless water in front of me, without promises, without telling me what to do this time, and I was no longer afraid of it. He was not my owner, but the whispering imperishable voice that was going to console my unsatisfied longings. The cold water bath that would calm the impetuous, unsuspected

desire at my age. I was strong, I became strong by lifting logs and gathering nets. My body was begging me to change.

“As I walked away from the shore, my son waved his arms goodbye. I began to miss him at that moment, and I was moved. I'm going back, I shouted, echoing with my hands, so that he could hear from the beach. I don't know if he could hear me. He looked down and turned his back on me. I watched him walk back to the center of the village. I knew that I, his father, had disappeared from his history.”

The old man rubbed his face to hide the shine in his eyes, which were still visible between his skinny fingers.

“From then on, I was certain that I existed only for that ship and her crew, in which I was nothing more than a force of muscles and agile legs, a mouth to feed in abundance. At night, sometimes it took us a while to fall asleep, and we would talk. Some told stories, others played instruments that hid the rhythmic buzz of flies or the soft scratching of rats below deck. The night air refreshed us, watching the moon that tried to hide behind the land we had left.

“I made friends with several, but almost all of them were very young and only approached me to discuss ship matters. The older ones would meet after they went to sleep. Their eyes were slowly closing, with the pale female beauty of that half-moon above us.

"Montag, they asked me, what are you going to do when we get to land? Then I started thinking, and I laughed to myself. They looked at me as if I were crazy.

“I don't know,” I answered, “I'm going to walk, visit places and settle in the one I like the most. But I knew that the mere mention of staying in one place would make me think about what I had left behind, so I was always going to continue traveling.

"There is an area that they told me wonders about, one of them said then. His face shone with the blue tint of the night sky reflected in the water. The sea did not abandon us. Still not satisfied with surrounding us, he got inside the boat with that borrowed clarity.

"They say," he continued, "that it is in the high mountains of the South, far inland. Where the snows are eternal and the clouds hide the peaks. In the caves old men hide, so old that some count more than five hundred winters.

“We all broke into laughter that we feared would wake up the rest of the crew. A scream was heard and the clatter of chains, then we were silent, but without stopping smiling. Our friend looked at us very seriously, perhaps even offended.

"What I tell you is true, and he paused, thinking that perhaps he had made a mistake in telling us this. I have not seen them nor can I prove it, I am only telling you what I heard from the mouths of others.

"They deceived you," one of the older sailors interrupted, "most of those stories are lies. We travel and see strange things, but that's how they seem to us because where we come from we don't usually see them. You live almost all year round in the village, On the other hand, I have traveled and seen things that would amaze you. But that's living for so long, and he made an incredulous gesture shaking his head. I, however, thought for a while about what I had heard, and I dared to ask:

“Didn't they tell you what their longevity is due to? The others looked at me, intrigued.

"It seems that it is the air, or the water of the mountain, the closeness of the sky and its supposed eternity, he answered me, and no one laughed this time.

“We went to sleep, while I thought not about that place or any other, but about the width of my chest, and the measureless strength that dominated me. I wished I had a woman in my arms that night.”

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Zaid looked at the ceiling of the cave, where the spirits were still hidden. He looked down at Montag, who had paused in his story. The afternoon light arrived dimly and increasingly paler from the entrance covered by large dry branches, crossed by the smell of rain and the sound of the wind.

-It rains here every night at this time. They are the ice that forms clouds on the peaks during the day. Then, when winter comes, the snow won't let us go out.

Zaid remembered that he was not here to stay. He got up and went towards the corner where Tahia's body was. She shined a torch on it while she cut the ropes. The white reflection of the knife caught Montag's attention.

-Beautiful dagger.

"Too beautiful," he replied, "for the task I have given you." But maybe it should be like that, only the truly beautiful is strong to do certain jobs.

She continued untying the bundle, and her body was gradually revealed. There were many fabrics, and he spread them out next to the fire to dry

them. When the corpse was completely uncovered, he shone light on it. Montag approached.

Tahia now had a different expression on her face. Her lips were parted, the corners turned down, her jaw drooping slightly. Eyebrows furrowed and eyes narrowed, fixed on something. The fingers of her hands extended and separated. Zaid stepped back, his face covered in sweat. The light of the torch moved with the trembling of his hands, distorting the size of things in the narrow world of the cave.

"Calm down, son," said the old man.

-But... I don't understand... she... has always been looking at me, so...

-They were the ones who scared her during the trip.- Montag pointed to the ceiling.-Not all the dead form a harmonious community. There are misgivings, conflicting desires. Your wife follows you, out of pity, although she would like to get away from those who disturb you.

The dogs were still in the background. They had not eaten all day, and had not asked for food. You could barely hear his breathing.

Zaid felt chills and tried to cover himself with the first thing his hands found near him. Without realizing it, he had taken the cloths that he had just removed from Tahia's body. The coldness of the rags worried him even more, but he did not take them off. He stared at his own shroud, lost in thought and with eyes full of fear. He was still shaking. Sweat already covered his body, and his legs weakened until he fell. Montag held him, then touched his forehead.

"You're burning, son." He took off the cloths and rubbed the body with the furs that he reserved to cover his chest in the winter.

Zaid felt caressed, as if his mother were there, healing him.

Mother, it's been a long time since I've seen you. I have missed you, I have begged for your presence, I have thought of your face so many times. And my father and my brother? Let's go back, mother, let's be together in the forest again. Father and I will go hunting. Don't forget to prepare a great meal for us when we return. We'll arrive before nightfall, and I'll give you that kiss you're always asking for.

My firstborn, the one I always thought was the most beautiful and strong. I never expected it to be your destiny to be the carter of the dead. I will not put my shadow on your back. I will help you, I will rub you with oils when you are tired. I will cover you with kisses, dreaming that I kiss your father's body. The two are one, the two are men, my lovers. Dear son, how I regret, how I regret...!

-Wake up!- The previously soft voice was now Montag's hoarse and exhausted voice.

Zaid opened his eyes. The old man's hands warmed his chest, and the aroma of the oils cleared him up. A steam rose from the fire in which the preparation was warming. He coughed. Thick white saliva stained the floor.

"Don't stop," the old man told him.

Zaid looked at him as if he saw a god, with the innocent look of someone who believes he is lost and begins to find his way back to his body. He coughed again, and this time the liquid came from deeper and was dark. It continued like this almost all night, while Montag threw that rot into the bonfire, with a prayer on his lips. The smoke became more abundant and flooded the ceiling. The spirits moved and made a sound of dull knocks against the stone that they could not pass through. The shadows became fainter, almost imperceptible, and the silent cries of sorrow and pain reverberated in echoes that finally penetrated the rocks, to dissolve in the porous substance of the inert and stony.

Throughout the night, Montag remained on guard to watch over him. Zaid was not sleeping at all. He could not escape from his usual dreams, while he listened to the old man's distant and consoling story.

“I have told you,” Montag said, stroking Zaid's forehead, “how I found out about the existence of these mountains. The ship arrived at the delta of a river that the natives called Luar. The brown waters carried trunks, branches and mud because it was the time of thaw. The boat could not move upstream, and we had to get off. There were several of us who left the crew, but they did not let us take supplies with us. We started walking always towards the south. The horizon was so wide that you couldn't imagine it if you hadn't seen it. No mountains, not even hills, just a flat green plateau and few trees interrupting the sun on the plain. There were sheep and goats, and the shepherds spoke in a strange hiss. We did understand after a long time, and as the day was already dying, we managed to get them to supply us with water and food in their homes.

“We slept well that night, tired as we were, with our skin still dry from the sea sun. We looked so tanned, the locals looked like snowflakes next to us. They looked at us with amazement, as if we were from a dark land. How were we going to explain to them, without knowing their language well, that we were whiter than them, that our light eyes were not the result of spells. The shepherds' children ran around while we talked with their parents. They caressed our bearskin clothes, looking in surprise at the harpoons we had stolen from the ship.

“The country of those men was peaceful, and a warm climate made the fruits of the crops with which they fed all year long grow. They were not hunters, they fished from time to time in the rivers. We shared several nights with them by the bonfires, under the light of a serene moon, sister of the other witch moons of my lands.

“They told us that wild people from the east had attacked them many times during their history, and they settled for a long time if the region was prolific in animals. But it was especially in the bloody winters, when the herds of bison migrated, that the hordes of that people arrived in greater numbers.

“The times we feel their footsteps echoing on the earth, we tremble. We drive our cattle to the cliffs, but the fields always end up devastated, one of the shepherds told me.

“Do you know the land of the long-lived? I asked, I think that's what they call them, they say you can live almost an eternity there. They looked at each other, fire flashing on their distrustful faces.

“No one travels without the permission of the Elders, one of them answered me, they meet in the Assembly, on the banks of the river, further south.

“Friends, I told my companions, let's sleep tonight, and tomorrow we will leave for that village. We went to bed between yawns and words of gratitude to those who had sheltered us. The bonfires went out one after another. Only the bawling of the sheep and the last barking of the shepherd dogs could be heard. The twilight light was already almost imperceptible.

Everyone has abandoned me.

I see their souls light up for me in the clearing of the largest forest in the world, a forest that has the name of the world.

I'm alone, and I'm afraid.

Desolation and silence, not a fugitive or dying sound accompanies me. I am loosed from the bonds of men. I am a speck of dust spinning in the air, indecisive and unable to decide, without the strength to overcome even my own lazy will.

I am the feather of a sick bird in the wind, ash that was once something else now irrecoverable, a blade of grass between the teeth of a beast, the drop of water on its lips.

Nothing is known to me anymore, no one will know me. The world does not exist nor does it make sense because what gave reason to memory has died. No voices, no faces, no gestures or blows. Without the timid or

irritated blow of someone who hated me. At least hate is something, a wood to cling to in this wandering lost in the midst of dark green stars. Trees that should be home that I don't remember.

They are gone. They have abandoned me, and that is why I no longer exist.

“In the morning, we woke up as if we had slept for many days. After bathing on the river bank, we set off. There were no traces of the shepherds, only the grass of the field eaten by the herds. The town must have been upriver, so we walked along the beach, with branches like canes. We knew that the journey was going to be long, especially when the extensive landscape of plains was still intact after ten days. But in the tiredness of our legs we noticed the almost imperceptible rise towards the origin of the river.

"Where is that town?" asked one of my friends, I don't think it exists. I wanted to encourage them, because it was not easy to get food in those places. The fish were spiny and had little flesh, and the water became cold.

“Whoever wants to return to the sea is free, I told them when almost thirty nights had passed and we still had not found the place. After all, no one was obligated to share my strange anxiety with me.

“I'll return,” one decided. As he walked away, the rest of us watched him for a while, with our backs slightly hunched, our mouths open exhaling the morning steam, our beards growing. We didn't tell him anything. We limited ourselves to raising the hand that had been kept warm until then under our clothes, as the only and sufficient demonstration to dismiss him. Then the hands returned to their place, and the others began to look at me, but I couldn't stand it for long, so I continued on.

“The beach was transformed into stony paths between high cliffs and the river, which flowed faster and faster, was rte. One nearly slipped as we passed through a narrow, muddy passage. From time to time we met several fishermen, but none of them wanted to answer our questions about the region we were looking for.

“Look at the Elders, was the only thing they answered. We were tired. Our heads were spinning to the rhythm of the water, and that rhythm was what our will had submitted to in order to survive. That thought marked our clumsy steps. On two occasions, we killed stray goats. We butchered them and cooked them, not knowing when we were going to eat something similar again. We even heated the blood over a fire and drank it like thick wine.

“One afternoon we arrived at a promontory where two tributaries of the Luar flowed out. We saw a ruined group of shacks and the continuous

movement of people that gave life to the roads. It was a poor village on the edge of the narrowest stream that ended in the main channel. The water that passed by the town seemed stagnant, overcome by the momentum of the other tributaries, a dark, dull liquid full of dirt and excrescences. You could hear the barking of many dogs in the distance, sad barking of old animals. A muffled shout of children also slipped through the fog that had begun to settle over the waters. The mist grew until it covered the entire width of the riverbed, and overflowed like a malleable mass until it submerged the banks and the entire village. Soon there was no body or hut left that could be clearly seen from where we were.

“The town seemed to be used to it, because the people on the streets became confused in the fog, incorporating themselves into its substance. As if the village loved the fog and gave meaning to its life of water and mud. We walked there before it got completely dark.

On this beach, alone, standing on the sand that the waves lap without wetting me, I look towards the south, at the funeral caravan of mourners. The men have their bodies painted yellow, with black stripes shading their torso. On their heads they wear plumes of crow feathers, announcing their sleepless nights, their hunger for darkness.

Behind them come the bearers of purifying incense, the aroma of spices and oils that penetrate the soul of those who fly over their own funeral.

Then, the mourners, the sad faces of my parents and my brother. They walk with their heads down behind the men who carry the body of their son, with the shadow of the son wrapped in the shroud. I fly over him... over me..., and my contours encompass them, cover them as if I wanted to protect them from all evil, from any unknown will for tragedy.

They are still young, but tears make them ugly. Father is dressed in black, and two spots darken his cheeks and beard. He wears a mourning hood, high and adorned with dry owl eyes. Mother is covered by a white robe, because women point the way to offspring. They cannot wear black, they must not wear shadows that disturb the welcoming belly of the future. She doesn't cry, she looks at the earth she walks on and thinks about heaven.

My brother has grown up, he is almost a man, but his soft beard fails to hide his still weak eyes. A nascent strength is emerging in the color of the spirit that peeks through his eyes. He is the light that illuminates the funeral below the line of my body raised to heaven.

I see them approaching, and I can feel my desperation, big like a ball of wood and fire growing in my gut, fighting to get out, burning me.

I don't want to be dead.

I shout it to the wind that stirs the waves of the silent river, the ritual dresses, the flames of the fire that precedes my corpse. I wave my hands without running, because my legs are heavy, full of sand.

-No, parents! Alive!

And I start to laugh. The clouds are witnesses of my joy at seeing them, at recovering them, my deceptive joy.

They don't hear me. They continue walking towards the altar that awaits me.

“My friends and I arrived and the fog cleared a little, but even so we found ourselves almost helpless in that village. They looked at us sullenly, as if they had never seen foreigners before. They interrupted their work, leaving their tools and shovels, and dried their sweat, murmuring a strange dialect among themselves as they saw us pass by. We must have looked like beasts to them, with our long beards, shabby clothes. We approached a group in front of a hut, but they retreated. Who knows what they were thinking, about the daggers we were going to pull out from under their clothes, about the blood that would spill from their bodies? We saw them lower their hoes to the ground and rest their hands on the handles. A feigned neutral position, but not harmless.

“We looked for the elders of the Assembly, I said, not knowing if they understood me. They looked at each other several times, as if in a game without words. Then I realized, for the first time, that these men were ageless; something that I couldn't define at that moment oment, gave timelessness to his features. They did not speak, but a look of agreement was reflected on their faces. The one who was closest, he stretched out an arm towards me. I saw in his eyes the desire to reunite with something lost. But he withdrew his hand without even managing to touch me, and then pointed towards the end of the town, barely visible in the mist. I tried to shake his hand to thank him, but he turned away from me, and instead of fear or fury, I saw the saddest heartbreak in his eyes. Don't tempt me, he seemed to say, don't remind me of what I've lost. We headed towards where he had indicated, and when we turned around, I felt his eyes on our backs as we walked away.

“Three suns he had taken us to cross the tributaries and we were tired. Our skin was irritated by mosquitoes and other insects we had never seen before. However, the thought of sleeping gave me the feeling of wasted time. That's why I continued alone. My companions lay down next to the pigs' water trough and the few skinny horses, sharing the same place and rest with the dogs.

“Despite the sun rising through the heavy and hard fog, which would take half a day longer to disappear, the innumerable streams of water

around the village raised a constant and soporific vapor. I couldn't make out the construction until I got very close. I then discovered the Assembly House, precarious but large compared to the rest of the huts. It was surrounded by deep mud ruts made by the carts. No one answered my call, so I went inside. The darkness inside was gray, reminding me of the rough sea before a storm. Someone touched my arm, and asked me a question that I didn't understand.

“I seek the Wise Elders,” I said quietly, the place seemed to compel me to respect. I perceived other shadows moving around. My eyes gradually became accustomed to the darkness, and I could see the four old men. After observing me like flies circling around me, they went to a table at the back of that room of still indistinguishable size, and sat down on some planks. They had been arranged in a symmetrical order according to their heights. The two in the center were tall, thin, with bald heads and long faces. One had a pointed, white beard. At the extremes, one was small, with a firm, rigid back, the other had shoulder-length hair, almost as beautiful as a woman's.

“Wise Elders, I began to say, I am a sailor from the North, who has known of the strange land hidden in the mountains of the South.”

“And why are you looking for her?” asked the one with long hair.

“Because... I don't know how to explain it... I abandoned my family without knowing what I was looking for, and I find myself lost right at the entrance to my dream...

“That's it, a dream,” said the bearded one, severely. The shorter one interrupted him, more conciliatory.

“What would you call your dream, foreigner?

“I thought for a few moments that seemed too long because I didn't know how to respond, but they didn't worry.

"Desire. That's what I can call it, I think. Something is eating me from the inside, that's all I know. A force so great that it could take me to the end of the world, and kill me if I don't get what I'm looking for. The strangest thing of all is that I don't mind spending the rest of my life failing. The elders began to talk to each other, deliberating over my words.

“You must know, stranger, the bearded man then said, that those who cannot bear to live in the Long-lived region return to the town, and are no longer the same. Desiring and rejecting is not the behavior for honest men. You must go in search of what you really need, and need what you crave. Both are the head and tail of the same serpent that we call man.

“Have the residents, I asked in the pause that the other made, lost their sanity?

“If that is what you call that space that is in their heads and has the mark of time, that occupies all their thoughts and dreams, harassing them without end or rest, yes, that is what has happened to them.

“Outside, some children had approached to spy through the cracks. The voices of their parents called to them from afar. The old man who until then had remained silent, straightened his back on his wooden and straw bench, and spoke.

“There is only one question that I am going to ask you, and it will be enough for you to reach the path that we will show you. Only one is also the correct answer.

“Maybe I smiled, I'm not sure, but that gesture must have bothered him.

“Don't think it will be that easy. The more you think about it, the more difficult it will be. The more you search, the more clouds, circles of obstacles, shadows will separate you from the answer. If you know it, it will flow from your memory like water from a waterfall. It's there, or it's not.

“Okay, Elders, I understand.

“Then, pronounce the name of the first god, t It seemed like a very simple question, but it was impossible to answer. Who had created the gods more than themselves, who were eternal. I searched my memories for all the words I had heard, all the names I knew, or that my memory took for granted. I sweated, I felt the thick drops of restlessness wetting my back. My wet hands rubbed against each other, nervous. I was going to lose the only chance I was given in a game I thought was unfair, and I got angry.

“Do you Elders think you know everything? Do they have that name and are they still alive? It is impossible to find out such a word, venerable old men. If the gods were born from nothing, which they themselves created, then they do not exist, because they are the nothing from which they emerged. Nothing can be generated from nothing.

“When I finished, I had an accusing finger extended towards them, while he trembled. I saw them get up, I thought they were angry, but they looked at each other in agreement. I even thought I saw them cry for a moment. They approached me and took my hands. His hands, son, were so beautiful, as weak as those of a dead person, and I'm sorry that now you see me tearing up like that, but I can't help it. They hugged me while telling me: that's the name. And they revealed to me the location of the path.

My shrouded body is not my body.

I am a soul haunting the sites of his death. I know that I die to the world, and this idea, together with the cloudy sky and the birds flying over the river, is gray. I can communicate with the landscape, which remains

unscathed by the passing of men. I am part of the earth, just another bird dipping its beak into the water in search of food.

I see my father kissing the shroud before being carried to the altar, and the Great Witch appears with them, covered by the cloak of wolf skins, wide, imposing, as if the beasts were protecting them. Because more than his body, his aged face, his hands stained with moles, it is the tunic that gives him true authority. Even the colorful cornet tied to his hand is louder than his worn-out voice.

The pain grows slowly. It comes from the witcher. Just by looking at him, he pricks me with splinters that come from his eyes. He brings the cornet to his lips and sings sad music, but so soft and beautiful that the devout submission of the people to his will is not surprising. He knows how to govern them, exalt their spirit, the malleable feelings of him. He has them in his hands, between the fingers that hold the instrument. A solemn song begins, people prostrate themselves in the sand, and the birds stop their flapping wings to listen to it.

If it were not my own death, I would also submit to this mystical enthusiasm. The witcher lights the bonfire with the torches, the flames rise like frightened birds. Upwards, everything is gray, an opaque mass that spreads among the people. My parents remain on their knees, surrounded, engulfed by smoke. The witcher walks around the fire.

My body burns.

I touch my chest, I shake my legs checking my corporeality, suspended in that state of no time so similar to death, so painfully similar, that it seems more like a fallacy created for my deception. Then I open my eyes to the contradiction. Just a phrase, an implausible question due to its apparent futility. But doubt is a worm that eats away at my body until it leaves it like a spacious void inside my skeleton. A carcass now buried. The other, the remains defecated by that interrogating worm, is me, this me.

The memory and the tears, the inaudible voice, screaming. The hands and arms stiff with trembling extended towards the shell that is no longer even that.

One nothing towards another nothing.

*

Zaid hit Montag when he woke up. The old man tried to protect himself as best he could.

-Son! It's me! It's just a dream!

He was standing by the fire, sweating, and had his fists clenched tightly against the old man's chest. He had suddenly emerged safe and sound from his dreams, lucid and relieved to touch the old man's clothes and body. Then he let go and put his hands to his face, but he felt a tingling sensation in his palms. When he looked at them, he got up frightened and shook them over the flames.

"Take these beasts away from me!" he shouted. Tiny beings slipped from his fingers and fell into the fire. The flames grew and then subsided again.

-Don't be scared, you are expelling them...

If Montag was right, what was happening to him was good, but he felt horribly wrong. Even worse than before, when he only carried them inside or on his body, barely feeling them except at night.

-Even when?! Look, I'm sweating with the stench of the dead!

Drops in the shape of small corpses emerged from the skin. Montag forced him to lie down again, and he heated a preparation in which he had put some green leaves. Zaid continued vomiting and coughing into the flames throughout the day.

The old man went to Tahia's body. He moved the fabrics. The bodyhe father of the gods, their creator.

“I was speechless with surprise. or had changed since I was there. Her legs and arms were extended, and the previous expression of pain had changed to an expression of rest.

Zaid looked at him from his bed, amazed by that change. He wanted to get up but couldn't.

"I'll explain to you how it happened," said Montag, "but first I must continue telling you."

“When I left to see the elders, it was almost night. Nothing in the town had moved. The light continued as dim as in the morning. My friends were awake, talking to a man and a boy. When they saw me, they greeted me, although this time they did not seem anxious to hear my news, but rather worried for another reason.

“Montag, they told me, this man and his son told us that there is plague on the other side of the river. Half of the tributaries bring dead people to the main channel. We were lucky not to come across the bodies.

“That's right,” the man stated. He had a pronounced jaw, a wide and strong neck, but an almost childish and tearful expression in his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was tragic.

“It has been a while since we have been able to cross in search of the healer, and he looked at his son, roughly squeezing the young man's arm. The boy was tall and thin. He could see the rigidity of his rapidly growing bones through the sallow, pale skin. The hair on his beard sprang sparsely. He was not very similar to his father, but narrower in the shoulders, and his eyes shone. One was the almost complete inversion of the characteristics of the other, as if the inheritance had been seen in an inverted reflection before becoming flesh. They both had fairly long hair, with large curls that gave them a certain beauty.

“Montag, the poor man needs help, and we remember that you healed wounded people on the ship, and even saved the arm of one who was burned, remember?

“I started laughing, and looked at them with complacency.

“They are going to make you believe that I am a witch. No! I have learned certain things, but nothing more.

“Why don't you tell him, my friends asked him. The man then looked at them suspiciously.

“I'll only tell him,” he said, pointing at me. And we went to look for shelter and food, while we walked quietly. I thought about what a strange presence those two were, that by simply appearing and speaking to us, they had almost made us forget that we had to continue our journey.

“The boy was coming behind. I felt his gaze hard on the back of my neck, and I turned around. Immediately he looked down. He walked with an exaggerated sway of his body, dragging his feet, they seemed to weigh more than the moon that was rising at that moment over his back. The father, who said his name was Reynhold, took us to a stable where they had spent the last six nights.

“Waiting to cross the river, every morning I get up and go to look if there are bodies. Until today I have seen them all, some rigid, others swollen or of a color that makes me hungry. Some seem alive, the currents move their arms as if they were swimming.

“That night, while we were preparing the bonfire, he brought us food from the town. He offered us everything with a diligence that conquered the spirit of my companions. His son stayed away, and although his father called him, he refused. The man then continued talking about other things. Afterwards he asked me to separate from the group, and when the others were finally asleep, he told me his story.

“My son and I are from the northwest towns. If you have not ever seen a mass of men, women and children moving like a huge lake moving across the sloping land, you will never imagine what my town was like. My family had come from the west along with many others. They accepted us with difficulty at first, they said that we came from wild ancestors, and it was true. But a long time ago, before my generation, we stopped migrating, when we found the coast and the sea. The old people said that the world ended at those precipices, but the younger ones knew that it is just a way in which the earth sinks under water. We had seen the ships of the northern peoples, undoubtedly more advanced, and we established trade and barter with them. We were peaceful, that's how they understood it. Some of us became shepherds, and others cultivated the land. We were happy, I can assure you. I joined my wife as many years ago as my son's life. He is the only one we had, and it was our shadow and concern not to be able to give him brothers. The healers said it was because of my wife, but the town priests assured that someone in my family must have committed some never-confessed crime, or perhaps someone in my descendants would have, for that reason we were punished. The truth is that my little one grew up with a shy character, overprotected, it is true, but it became inevitable for us to act like this. Are you a father? Have you not suffered with each blow or cry of your children, as if it were the end of your life, or the fate of the world was in danger? Didn't he have the sense ation that everything ceased to exist or have meaning if your child was not totally happy? He grew up, and we were never able to talk to him, or get him to talk to us. I mean if he said more than yes, father or yes, mother. Sometimes I even wished that he would yell at me or hit me to know that he was alive in some way, that at least his fury gave him a human characteristic. You see him there, asleep, with that young man's body, and he will seem like one more to you. But it's not like that. He hears voices. Yes, he didn't look at me in amazement. He says he hears voices, and I don't know how long. I discovered it only after the death of his mother, when I saw him moving at night as if he were awake. However, he sleeps. His body rests, so does his senses, but his mind lives in another region, an impenetrable area for me. I say that perhaps this has happened to him before, because the only time he spoke to me, after what he did, he mentioned the order to which the gods subjected him. That's what he calls them: voices of the gods. At first it was just one, the one that ordered him to kill, then they became multiple when he fulfilled that duty.

“The man gave a tired sigh. The memories of him exhausted him more than the words or the intensity with which they were told.

“It all started one day when I took him hunting for the first time. He started looking at me blindly in the middle of the forest. Does He understand Me? He looked at me without discovering me. While he tried to guide him in the use of the spear, he watched me so carefully that he

seemed to search into my soul. But not to me, actually, but to my ancestors. To the men who had had the same power as him to perceive the voices of other worlds. Two generations had passed without showing up in my family. And he had returned without knowing, I, a simple man, how to control him. My son shook his head, nodding not to my instructions, but to another voice that was only in his head. He was already the height he is now. The wind shook his hair and the branches of the trees with a sound of thunder and a skin-chilling air. Let's go back before it gets dark, I told him. He had hunted very well that day, so well that I felt proud. But today I think I should have realized it sooner. Why hadn't he even made a mistake? It was as if someone else had been with him the entire time to tell him the direction and the exact point of the target. Someone who could be everywhere at once. As we returned home, the storm broke out. He insisted on carrying the prey alone. I placed the two fawns on his back, bent by his weight. I was surprised to discover that strength in my son. The animals' blood ran down his bare back, dripping onto the dirt and rainy road that led us home. I was behind him, treading that blood, with my eyes on his incomprehensible body, his young bones, trying to read his soul. Then, I was afraid. Son, I shouted to him in the wind that brought the announcement of a greater storm, we will not arrive before the stream overflows, I will help you carry them! He turned around. With the light of the lightning I saw on his face a look that I still fear when I remember it, because they were not my child's eyes: they had the experience of the world. When we arrived at the cabin, my wife was waiting for us with hot food. He had left the deer at the entrance. Don't leave them there, you have to put them in a dry place. He looked at me as a man looks at another who dares to order him something without the right to do so. He turned his back on me to enter, and I grabbed his arm, but he forcefully let go and pushed me. Before I could avoid it, he was already inside. His mother had run to hug him. I looked at them side by side, so close together, that I decided to postpone my reprimand for later. She was too happy for him, for his initiation. They continued hugging for a time that seemed excessive to me, but I didn't interrupt them. He had barely crossed the threshold. My wife's body was hidden by that of our son, only her linked arms could be seen, her legs and hips slightly inclined, her head resting on one shoulder. I heard him crying with emotion, and muffled moans. Come on, woman, stop it! I shouted at her. But as I approached, his hands had separated and fell limply on his back. Her legs were not supporting her, but were dangling. Her hips were a pendulum. Her head swayed as if caressing her shoulder. What's wrong? I asked. My son's muscles trembled, like when he stops exerting great force. My wife's body slipped from his arms and fell to the ground. The smell of burnt food joined the lightning and patter of rain on the roof. They love her, he told me, and I, stunned, hit her one blow after another, until her face was deformed. I only stopped when I knew I could kill him too.

“Reynhold became agitated when he told me all this, and I wanted to console him. Although I found his story incredible, he did not believe that he was not sincere.

“That night I cried He saw more than the rest of the winter, and the morning discovered us flooded and lying on the damp bunks, still and silent. I buried my wife on a high hill. Then we locked ourselves in, without seeing anyone for many days, waiting for the water to go down. My son was leaning against a wall, knees bent and face in his hands. I looked at him, I thought of a punishment, but any one I found was also a punishment against myself. The rain continued and caused the earth to flow from the hills, which the trees could barely retain before it reached our village. And the water unearthed the dead. We could no longer hide from the world, nor live in the hut as if we were as innocent as the roof that covered us. I put my blind faith in such a wish. I preferred to be afraid of my son, locked up there, than to have to endure the judgment of others. When they came to get us and I told them everything, they treated me even worse. I told them the truth, because my confusion dictated it. They thought, however, that I wanted to escape punishment by blaming him. They were going to kill me. So we fled. Since that day we haven't stopped, and what I'm looking for now is for someone to help me punish him. I can't do it alone, not because I don't dare, but because these hands are simply not enough to accomplish it.

“But what punishment is that, I asked.

“You must help me end our blood. Do you know what that means to me? He is the last of my family, which was once the largest of the great tribes. He will be the last, definitely.

“I wanted to know if he was really willing to kill him.

“I want to burn his descendants, he answered me, banish them from the world, don't you understand? Take away her children, rob her of the possibility of having them, before it's too late. I know she's still a virgin, I've been watching him day and night. Every time I am forced to sleep, I suffer thinking about what he is doing. Perhaps, he even knows of my purpose and will try to avoid it when the time comes. I have kept him away from women, so that his seed does not devour the world with this blood. I ask you to assist me the day I castrate him.

“The man was ready to forever interrupt the line of his race. We had spent the whole night talking. Outside the stable, the morning light made the fire pale. I felt restless and eager to get rid of the man.

“I can't do what you're asking me to do,” I replied, “how can I be sure that it wasn't you who killed his wife. The man looked at me with anger, and he told me: What you are looking for, if I'm not mistaken, is the portal to the region of the Long-lived.

“Are you going to tell me what even the elders wanted to deny me?

“Those old cheats won't tell him anything even if he answers his questions, and if they do, he won't find the place with his clues. They have not returned to the mountains for centuries. They are the only ones who

have survived returning to the town. In the mountains they have no one to govern nor anyone to worship them. Does he believe that they will share his eternal life with someone else? They would kill each other if they knew for sure that they were capable of dying. I know about that place because my son knows it, I have heard him say it while he was talking to his gods in his dreams.

“Without that information, Zaid, I would have spent my life searching for the entrance without finding it. When I reached the trails that lead to the mountains some time later, I could see that the man was right. If your steps led you directly here, it was because of them, the ones who now look at us from the ceiling. They guided you. Reynhold's son knew it too, and I saw, in that revelation, the peace of my soul. My whole life was going to become an absurd failure if he rejected it. I have asked myself hundreds of times if I had the right to punish his son in that way, to obtain my almost eternity at the expense of his. He had to respond quickly, because the opportunity was disappearing with the passing night. Reynhold extended his hand to me to confirm the pact. I hesitated for a moment, but the small details were unnecessary if something larger had already been drawn, the size of my desire.

“We decided to do it two days later. We didn't say anything to my friends. We sent them to look for supplies in neighboring villages, and they would not return until the next day. They said goodbye before twilight to take advantage of the night traveling. I heated water over the campfire, and prepared the cloths and knife.

“The boy and his father returned with the wood and threw it on the fire, which grew, illuminating the entire stable. The man looked at me, and I nodded. We pretended to stay talking late into the night, until the son went to bed and we were sure he was sleeping. How my heart trembled as I approached, what horrible premonitions I had in front of the faint light of the fire.

“We pounced on the young man, who began to resist with all his might. I held his legs, while his father knelt on his chest and held him by the shoulders. His screams shook the flames, and the light made that the world would also move or protest. The shadows on the ceiling fell and rose. Our shadows went from wall to wall. And his screams were terrifying. The father took out from among his clothes a wooden tube with a substance to numb him that the old women of the town had given him. He tried to open his mouth, but he bit him, and we tried to hold his jaw with a rope.

"I have it and you pour the liquid!" I shouted at him, but the boy closed his mouth tightly, and his eyes fixed on me with hatred. So I decided to hit him so he wouldn't continue hurting me with that look.

“You did well,” said Reynhold, as he poured the liquid, but his voice trembled. We undressed him, and I washed the body with warm water. I grabbed the knife.

“I'm going to do it, he asked me, just tell me where to cut without killing him. I pointed out what he had asked for, while he held the blade in his right hand. I had to envy his strength, at least at first. When everything was going well, and despite having tied him, the boy began to move his legs and raised his head. I only thought about hitting him again, but he didn't want to faint anymore. I couldn't gag him either because he wouldn't stop biting my hands.

“Son, it is I, your father, who is going to do it! No one else will have to answer the day you want to take revenge. But this is my duty. His voice cracked until it disappeared in the spasm of the crackling fire. He said no more, and then I saw the blood gushing out.

“Wait, I told him, and realized the absurdity of the warning as he covered the wound with cloths that became soaked one after another. His hands were shaking so much that he couldn't fix the knife in an exact spot, even less so with the blood staining his face.

"Leave it to me!" I asked him. I had him compress the wound while I cleaned. Since he didn't obey me, I yelled at him again. But he didn't move. He looked at his son, who continued to scream unbearably, although at least he had not managed to untie himself. The pain, Zaid. The pain inflicted on others is a threshold from which there is no return. I heard those screams with my soul trembling. The barking of the dogs came from afar, like voices of lament and accusation.

“Reynhold had begun to change the fabrics again, throwing away the dark red dyed water. The young man's color, on the other hand, was turning white. He wanted to tell the man that that was not the place I had pointed out to him, but he did not want to reproach him further. I finished what he had done, and sewed the skin. The blood slowly stopped. I was going to throw the cut fragment into the fire when the father stopped me, and put it inside a leather bag.

“I left the stable. I was amazed to see that it was still night. Some luminous lines of canine eyes were waiting for me, howling, without getting closer. They looked like narrow paths of stars over the river. I approached a shore apparently free of the dead. The dogs growled at me as they followed me. I took off my bloody clothes and left them aside. The animals pounced on them, and then remained at the edge of the river. I went under to wash myself, but I didn't dare come out right away. I saw the dogs circling the shore and howling. Then, they dispersed as dawn broke. Only one followed me with his gaze as I covered myself with what was left of my clothes.

“I returned and saw that Reynhold had washed his son and was laying him on a dry blanket. Every now and then he changed the cloths and dried

the sweat. The only sign of vitality in the boy was a tremor that refused to give way, like the last step before the void.”

"Did he survive?" Zaid asked after a long moment in which he had been thinking, as if something else was bothering him without knowing what exactly.

-Yeah. When he recovered, the plague had already ended, and they managed to cross the river. They would continue walking eastwards, beyond the Droinne, they told me. Then I didn't hear from them again. But until the afternoon they left, the son continued to hear voices that stunned him day and night, making him suffer perhaps even more than us.

-And you got what you were looking for, right?

Montag did not answer.

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Zaid felt recovered. The preparation that the old man had made him drink while he spoke had given him strength. But Montag was not in the cave. He tried to get up and move his numb legs. He walked around a few times and stumbled over the bodies of the two dogs. His fur shone with the clear reflection of the morning from the entrance.

The spirits had also disappeared from the ceiling, their absence revealed more by the still peace of the void up there against the smooth rocks. He still feared he hadn't gotten rid of them all, and he felt his body, rubbed his beard and hair in search of the little beasts he had been expelling. Seeing the old man returning, he went to him and knelt down.

-Thank you, teacher, for ridding me of them! Tell me if you see anything else around me, anything that still remains that I can't see. -Not for now. But I didn't do anything, it was this place that purged your spirit.

-I want to bury the dogs, I am still afraid of their corpses.

-We are not going to find deep land in these mountains, nothing but rock. We will put them in a bag to throw them in the stream.

Zaid held the leather bag while Montag lifted the bodies and dumped them inside. Then he lifted her on his shoulders and they left. The sun hit his face, he closed his eyelids and covered his face with his free hand. Montag helped him protect himself.

-Slowly, I should have warned you before.

-It doesn't matter, I'll get used to it. Keep telling me. I kept thinking about the young man. What was his name?

-The father never told me, but in those places they usually have the same name from father to son.

Zaid continued the rest of the way, treading cautiously, his legs were still weak. The reflection of the snow blurred his eyes, and his head began to hurt. However, he couldn't shake the thought of the similarity with Reynod's name.

-When did all that happen?

-It's been too long to remember exactly, but the father must be dead by now, and the son must be the same age your grandfather would be.

What if it is he, if it is the Witcher, the man who killed his own mother and was castrated for that act? If so, how were his sons and daughters born? If he lied about that, maybe he lied about my grandfather too.

-When they left - the old man continued saying - the father told me the secret of the portal. I then had the consolation, small, futile, but ultimately a consolation, of knowing that it would have been impossible for me to find it only with the instructions of the elders. You have already seen the path you came on the first day, so narrow between the rock walls, a narrow entrance that closes the view of the sky and leaves the slope in shadow. Too similar to the others, changing from day to day due to the wind, I would never have found it on my own.

it's not possible. Perhaps his voices made him feel superior, and without a doubt he was, but the other thing, about his descendants, was it perhaps a favor from the gods?

I crossed the threshold, and for a time I was sick. I told you about my strength, about the inexplicable impetus that forced me to flee my town, cross the sea, and destroy the life of a man who had just begun. That was what I expelled, not a dead body, but a kind of bubbling mass that had been growing in me for a long time. During all those nights I remembered those I made suffer, the recriminations of those I abandoned, and the son of Reynhold appeared to me so many times, that I believed him to be just another fragment of the shape of my eyes.

Reyn... nod... hold, ..reynhold... interchangeable names, indifferent as words in the mouth, disastrous as words in the mouth. sounds that cannot be erased. stuck in memory. determining a form, a past invented by that same memory that lies as if it belonged to another. we invented at every moment we create

Much later, I returned to my homeland. I visited my family. One of my sons was already a wise priest, and I felt proud. My wife had died, and my

other children had gone to other regions. I knew I would never see them again. I left memories for the only one left, I gave him a fur hat and a feather from the first bird I hunted in the mountains. They were like thoughts turned into objects so that they persisted longer than memory. Then I came back, and since then I have been waiting for my death. It's not a wish, I just hope for it. She's late. She is fine. I admit, sometimes I call her very quietly, I'm afraid she'll hear me. Others, I cry, because I know she will arrive. I realize that despite my age, the original desire that brought me here, I have not managed to feel, even for a moment, a god.

no one is blameless? nor the wise men, the mystics, those who heal and speak with the gods. What a disappointment, a sad disappointment to know that the most feared and respected man is just an evil child who grew up. But I can't judge him. Am I innocent? Not even now, that the dead have left me, can I say that I have changed. Outside only. Cleaner, more serene, but the same memory.

They threw the bag into the torrent that fell from the peaks. The water dragged the bodies until they disappeared down the mountain. They resumed their way back.

"What's wrong?" Montag asked, seeing him thoughtful.

-Nothing. I think of my parents, of my town.

The old man leaned on Zaid's shoulder to return to the cave. But something had changed. They sensed it as soon as they were approaching. White smoke came from inside, with the smell of goat's milk and the aroma of the meat that Montag was saving for the winter. A sound of footsteps, of a voice singing a strange litany came from inside.

"Could it be someone from the mountains?" Zaid asked.

Montag seemed surprised that this was so. Too much time had passed since I visited him. on for the last time.

-Some savage, then. Let me come in first, stay here.

The old man did not look convinced. He squeezed the young man's arm for a moment to hold him back. For the first time, he seemed afraid of being alone.

Zaid entered. At first, the still weak sight deceived him by forming a veil in front of his eyes. Then they broke and disappeared, and in their place arose the warm walls of the cave. The roof began to take shape, the floor of rammed earth, the bonfire, the vessel with the milk, the bags of salt and the meat. The aroma brought back fond memories of his mother.

A woman was there, slender, thin and very beautiful.

As much as she was Tahia.

She recognized her short hair, with small black specks, her dark skin, her bright, open eyes, blinking. Her breasts were never too large, but rigid, with her timid nipples like pigeon beaks. Her hips gently molded. The shadow of sex, impenetrable, the last unexplored forest in the world.

-Tahia? "he" he dared to say, fearing that the image would disappear if he just named it.

She smiled at him. Her lips opened, her teeth shone like bone remains that told of the paths they had traveled and her fateful company. She spoke, not her mouth, but the color, the softness of molded stone, the slight separation between her teeth recounted the places and destinations traveled.

He approached.

Thaia's hands were cold, but beads of sweat fell down her shoulders. Zaid dried it gently, he barely dared to touch it. He couldn't take his eyes off that profile of dead wood that was waking up again. His left hand rose to caress her face as she blinked. Her profile remained in shadow, with two gray dots in the place of her eyes, but he could already glimpse that smile that she had always managed to conquer him.

He wanted to kiss her, just give her a simple kiss on her cheek, however her remorse held him back. He put her hands under Tahia's elbows, holding her up as he helped her walk. She made a gesture that he understood, and he left her alone to lie down. He continued to clean her skin with warm water, while he caressed her.

"My Tahia, my wife," he repeated, and his hands were reunited with what they had lost. The memory of his hands was faithful.

Montag had entered. Zaid began to tell him, even though there was no need, but his enthusiasm took over.

-She's back for good, isn't she?-And he looked at Tahia. She had her eyes fixed on him, and caressed his cheek with a now warmer hand.

-I know you... - she said.- But I don't know your name.

Zaid stopped smiling. His eyelids closed and his lips sank so as not to cry.

anger grows and is pain. It is a bone in which the thorns, trees and rocks of the world have accumulated, which breaks into so many pieces that they will no longer be united again.

"What should I do?" He begged Montag.

-Say your name.

-But if I say it, I will no longer be able to be anyone other than the one I was.

The old man approached her, held Zaid's head in her hands and rested it on her chest so that he could cry without her seeing him.

-Listen. My heart trembles, son, it doesn't work. Tremble, since that day...

Then Zaid knew it was better to say it once and for all. The guilt would not fade as long as time existed.

-It is I, woman, the man who killed you.

She did not answer. Her chills simply disappeared, and beads of sweat from her hands now ran down Zaid's beard.

Anger breaks through.

It escapes through my mouth, it extends in the shape of a white hole that seems to expand the ceiling beyond its real limits, making it as encompassing as the sky. There are words, clatters of wood clashing and winds passing through musical instruments. A set of echoes that transforms into stinging pains, similar to the old pain, the one that hurts my sex every time I remember the name and figure of the one who caused it.

...hold, say the noises in the white hollow of fury.

Through that space remorse flees, because I determine, from today, the borders of my world.

*

They prepared supplies for the journey, and said goodbye to Montag.

Tahia extended a hand to him, but the old man turned away from her. Zaid laughed at him, and Montag, almost ashamed as a child, allowed himself to be kissed by Tahia.

It was a harsh kiss on his cheek, without the warm taste that women, he remembered, used to leave with his lips. But the old man said nothing. He pretended everything was fine when Zaid hugged him like she was his father.

The young men set off, and he watched them walk down the mountain, hand in hand.

He felt weak. He wondered why he hadn't stopped her from touching him. Why, after so many years of waiting, had he let it happen like this, so abruptly.

Sitting on the side of the road, his sharp ones were weakening. His hands fell to his sides, limp. He could barely see those who were leaving, shrinking until they disappeared among the rocks and fog.

He wasn't even sure he was still alive when he remembered what he had seen in that woman's eyes when he received her kiss.

The big black hole in the place of his eyes. THE BODIES IN THE LAKE

Everything around him was a set of faces, often undefined and unrecognizable, but they all belonged to the men of the town that had rebelled. And at the same time that the weapons and arms, the blows and wounds occurred on his body or on the bodies of others, the sweat that soaked the men and the tears of the wounded, all those unmistakable flows of fear, They fell to the ground as offerings.

The spears and arrows came from many faces that seemed to be the same man, son of the old man who he thought would always be faithful to him.

The weapon craftsman, bow carver.

He remembered how many times he had asked him to leave behind the ancient spears and adopt the bows and arrows that he had brought from other towns. But the sorcerer always refused to deviate from his ideas, the principles that kept the people isolated. The rebels had reached the end of their peaceful protests, of their demands for a way of life that Reynod was not willing to consent to. And when his threat was too tangible to ignore, and hearing the plea of his own men asking for new defenses against the rebels, he had to resort to the weapons he had kidnapped from the carver.

Open your horizons, the old craftsman had asked him one day, respectfully, at the meeting that was requested every season to talk about town affairs. The gunsmith and his eldest son arrived very early, after passing through the frost on the hill on a winter morning. The old man was a little older than Reynod, but his curved back and weak neck were pitiful signs of his occupation. His clear eyes were now useless, almost blind, although they retained their brilliance. The white beard marked the sad profile of a hermit forcibly dragged out of his hut. Reynod looked harshly at the young man's stern face.

"How dare you take your father away from the warmth of the fire?" He reproached him, while he extended a hand to lead the old man towards some fur blankets next to the fire. A tenderness enveloped him that he himself found strange. Seeing himself, his body still upright, his arms strong, next to the armorer's small torso, gave him chills, as if an invisible fly was running over his skin, leaving time stains with its paws.

"Listen to my son," the old man asked, and Reynod looked at the other suspiciously.

Aristid began to talk about the same demands that the rebels had been making for a long time. A look of boredom appeared in Reynod's eyes, and raising his gaze to the ceiling, as if the gods shared his impatience, he returned a rigid, furious expression to Aristid, and did not let him finish.

-You heard my last word a long time ago. If I have to talk about this again, it will not be with my lips, but with the language of my hands to close your eyes once and for all...

The young man was silent and pursed his lips tightly, he needed to silence what he was thinking. Then he took his father's arm to pull him away from Reynod. The witcher said nothing, but watched Aristid's face as he turned his head towards him before getting lost in the light that advanced through the morning mist.

It was the same expression that was now forming on every enemy warrior, on every hand holding a spear, on the bearded cheeks of the rebels, so well trained that it was not possible to understand how they had obtained that skill. He should have exterminated them when he had the chance, he thought, but in reality he was speaking out loud without realizing the edge of the arrows grazing his arms, the daggers from which he could hardly defend himself.

We are many...we will win because we are many and the gods support us.

But he repeated this to himself as if he had to convince himself. Numbers were the most important thing, and he regretted not having mobilized everyone. The rebels had surprised them. The shields with the image of the gods splintered with the blows of the axe, the legs were broken and the blood ran like sweat. The arrows looked like birds flying towards the men. And the men fell, and many others still walked, burying their screams in their wounds. The sun continued to shine on the dance of those who fought. Beyond Reynod's sight, the rebels held out and advanced upon the confused mass of their legions.

The feathered horn was lost. He didn't know why he remembered her at this time. Perhaps he wanted to make music there, to unify the cries, the whistling of spears and arrows, the plucking of bowstrings, the splashing of feet in the mud, the slapping of bodies, the creaking of hands to hold the tail to the soul - a wayward animal with slimy skin -, or tie it around the neck and lock it in the intimate hollow of the chest.

His hands left the spear and shield to touch his body. But he wasn't sureHis chest hurt, because his head also brought back memories, and the pain was focused on that part of his old body. The pain between her legs was the same, but it returned accentuated by the passage of time. The imprecise cut, the blood that stained his father, the expression of pious cruelty that he had seen on his face, and that today was drawn in the sky: the sun was one of his eyes, and the birds had been formed to model the contours of the face.

The pain went away and came back. When it became conscious as an idea, then it was not so intense. But then it slipped away with greater skill, and his hands were not able to catch it. She wanted to stop that burning so similar to her soul, that it was as if she wanted to escape through the wounds and spread the seeds in the sores.

He had fallen sitting in the mud, and they were no longer attacking him, perhaps they thought he was dead. His posture was not too strange for those killed in battles. The spirits sometimes chose such forms to humiliate the defeated, offering their backs and breasts to crows to feed them, and becoming birds that eat the flesh of other warriors.

But Reynod was still alive, and he looked to the ground for the feathered cornet. There were puddles of water full of mud and stones, feet that came and went with the imprecise times of a battle that was going on too long. He made his way through the legs of those who fought and through the dead. He picked up pieces of bodies, dug into the earth, soft as the gray clouds that had formed above them. He found the instrument, dirty and broken, but faithful to its owner. The cornet with the feathers of the capercaillie that he had killed the day he arrived in town on his way east. He tried to repair it, but nothing was going to make it the same as it had been, a symbol of bliss and redemption that distant afternoon passed when he had decided to reveal the voices of the gods to the chosen people. To reunite that group of men lost in the rites of the sun and the gods of evil in a single belief and a single cult.

He remembered the morning when the song of the grouse had woken him. At first he didn't know what animal it was. If that sound similar to thunder in the cloudless sky was from a beast. But a patina of rough decrepitude in the song, a tearing of trunks perhaps, or like birds scratching a rock with their beaks, uselessly and sadly. It was a song that insisted on something without purpose, concentrated but naive, hard-working and happy, with a nuance of tiredness and well-being at the same time. All this in very high, but opaque tones. The song not of one man, but of many, dominated by the hoarse voice of a strong, broad-chested old man. An old man whose voice was the resonance of time.

It was a morning of full sun bubbling over the grasslands west of the River Droinne. Reynod walked with sadness clinging to his skin, a shell of honey and pollen on his bitter body. He liked to immerse his thoughts in sorrow, like someone who licks his wound to know that he still lives. He still felt, at times, the absent presence of the parts of his body, the strangeness of what was torn away. But the sun kept him from such ideas, and he then wondered why the previous sweet voices had not returned, because those now were dry like the song of the capercaillie. As if what they had taken from him was that: the throat of the gods that his sex had engendered.

He was thinking about this when he heard the bird much closer, hidden among the bushes of a ravine that led to the river. The bushes moved and showed bright colors like the sun. Part of the sun seemed to have descended and was cooling at the water's edge. The sun had a voice, the hoarse voice of a strong, old man, dominant but benevolent. Then the last branches of the last bush parted, and the grouse emerged in its splendor. All red, all green, all yellow and black. Slender, erect, neck extended and crest held high, swaying proudly and elusively in the morning air.

The breeze moved its feathers and the wind existed only for the body of the creature it fed. The capercaillie walked delicately behind a female who was fleeing not too quickly. But none of them saw the man who followed them with the spear. The female was able to escape out of sight, but the grouse fell to the ground. His song, only overcome in its strange beauty until then by his figure, became a long cry, almost similar to that of a drowning child. Reynod remembered his own pain, and as he ran towards the prey, he tried to rid himself of the memory of the scar on his crotch.

Reynod angrily plucked the bird. The feathers piled up on one side, then scattered with the wind coming off the river. He chose the best feathers, and suddenly realizedbecause I hadn't thought about what I was going to do with them. He thought throughout the afternoon with the feathers in her hands, observing them in the silence that the river accompanied with the flow of the water. And he knew then that the grouse music must continue, and this time he would never die.

He looked among the trees for the one that had the most beautiful flowers. She found one with it was losing its leaves before the fall season, and its bare branches formed empty eyes among the rest. He had no flowers, but the fallen leaves were large and beautiful. They were the color of river water after a storm. Then he carved a cornet from a thick branch and tied the feathers to it. Then he put the tip of the instrument in his mouth and blew.

The music that emerged satisfied him, and each sound satisfied him a little more, until he was convinced that the chosen tree had been assigned to him by the gods. He looked at it again, and it seemed to him then the most beautiful tree he had ever seen, and the sound that emerged from the bark, cradled between his fingers, must undoubtedly come from the dreams in which the deities had abandoned themselves after create the beings of the world. The surrounding birds began to approach and fly over the clearing where Reynod had sat. The only thing that could be heard, in addition to the music, was the fluttering of the wings of the birds that continued to arrive, until the clarity of the sky was lost beyond the birds that flew in tighter circles as others joined in.

The forest light disappeared in a great shadow of gray eyes and crooked beaks. And the music was molded to the growing darkness between the plants, the paths between the branches, where incorporeal figures were

drawn. The sound attenuated until it fell into a depth of base instincts, of sad thoughts. The music traveled through regions of Reynod's body, places that also resembled the viscera of the gods. They had what they had taken from him: sex, and singing was what they had given him in exchange.

But he had to get what was his. Hand over whatever it takes to get it back. The exaltation of the gods, the adoration of an entire people given to Them. Thousands of spirits that would become countless with the passing of generations.

He would hand them over in exchange for the most elemental fragment of his body.

The sound could travel in time, because that was the dance of the air that pushed the men, moving their arms with tense muscles, their chest hair covered by the blood of others. Nothing seemed to protect them anymore, not even the skins and hides with which he taught them to cover themselves when fighting, although that idea was as rudimentary as it was simply their own knowledge of war. He had also had no choice but to get his sons out of isolation and build camaraderie between them and the sons of the men he knew would later have to face the rebels. But only Sorkus, the eldest, showed real interest and a skillful, natural skill for war.

"The rebels are causing more tumult every day," Reynod had said one day to his children, next to the current of a river that hid his words from any other foreign ears. He no longer fully trusted even his assistants.

Sorkus had looked at him then, with his dark eyes of fifteen winters, the body almost of an adult, the long, curly hair, black but mottled with brown luminosities under the sun reflected on the grass. However, the look was also full of respect and fear, eager to please his father. He was the only one of the three who every day, during the following summers, practiced throwing with the carver's weapons, which had lost the old dust in which they had been buried for a long time. He trained in the mornings, then swam in the river, ate, reviewed strategies and put together combat groups in his mind during the afternoons, which he would later comment on to his father. At night, he would get lost in the darkness to explore the settlements of the rebels, who lived far from the town, forced to depend on Reynod's domain for food, because they always received the remains of the animals that the witcher's hunting advances found first. . Nobody recognized that these families had revolted, and even less dared to say anything against the respected gunsmith and his family, but their looks were cold and only discreetly tolerant.

Sorkus's eyes were in front of him. Impeccable, hard as the strong fists that that promising warrior of fifteen winters had developed now, ten

summers later. Reynod felt those hands lift him off the battlefield as if he had the weight of feathers lost in the mud. He looked at his son, his face almost unrecognizable. The beard dirty with blood, the hair furrowed by cuts, minor wounds and other deeper ones, although not enough to take away his soul and that voice. z of a melancholic god, who had always made his father feel sure of his descendants.

The old man's head hung limply, after so many years of never having given way. Only his eyes lived and looked at the clear sky, calm despite the disaster and his dance revolving around the fighting men. Nothing but screams came from heaven, and then his ears also stopped perceiving them, then it seemed to him that the life of heaven was beginning to lift him from the earthly bed of men.

Carried in Sorkus's arms, he saw the path opened at his sides by his warriors as they watched him pass wounded. He would have wanted to continue with them. The path was narrow, the faces followed one another and overlapped as it advanced. They all finally converged into common traits, until he remembered that other person who had brought pain to his body. He felt a hole occupying his belly, filled with a black, foul-smelling liquid, which drained to the floor through Sorkus's hands and legs.

But it was not this that shook his spirit at first - later he would have time for despair and prayers - but seeing a figure of a woman in the distance, with dark skin, descending the hill at the foot of which was unfolding. the battle. Many birds had begun to flutter around the area in search of carrion, and at that moment a flock accompanied the woman in her descent. Her walk was slow, he seemed not to want to hurt his feet on the rocks. He was sure she was not looking at the ground, but ahead.

Maybe she was watching him.

Behind her was a young man with familiar features, so well known that her stubborn forgetfulness irritated him more than the pain of his wounds. But it wasn't that man that mattered for the moment, it was her. He had also seen her before, but not as someone with a precise, particular face, but perhaps as a dream glimpsed not in a battle, but in the explosion of a volcano that threw rocks.

It wasn't his body that was most striking, but his face. Perhaps her bright eyes stood out across the distance of the field, against the dark green of the gentle hillside. That was the disturbing thing, because the figure that he had seen in a river overflowing with lava, many time before - he already remembered it, the memory came, finally - was the same.

A beauty without time, and therefore without the possibility of any loss. Constant, distant at times, but perennial. Strong, thin. Dark in her physiognomy, but transparent in her eyes. You could guess her thoughts, see the gently constructed shapes of her brain. In its twists and turns, one

became dizzy and lost, until one found oneself different and empty after traveling through it.

The brain of death was dizzying.

The tongues of the brain called to the men, their hands touched them, and that moment became all the time. Same and without space and without hope.

That's why Reynod cried. He began to moan like he had not done since the day they mutilated him. Then he touched his son's beard, the thick beard he never had, and began to clean his neck with a caress.

The faces of the women.

Reynod wondered why they always showed up without being called. As now his mother also did with the changes of death in her wrinkles, in her eyebrows furrowed in pain and her lips twitched. Her hidden face against her right shoulder, the hug that compressed the fragile chest of that woman whose heart was shaking with intuition. She must have felt, in the arms of her son, the inverted arms of an affection that she had prayed for while she was raising that strange child who only spoke to the gods.

And the brain of death also vibrated in the trembling skull of her mother lying on her shoulder, in the gray hair whose black strands were beginning to eclipse and succumb like leaves in winter.

But I must stop, I will not think anymore if I want to maintain my lucidity. I do not wish that she, the great innocent murderer, the beautiful messenger of the timeless world of the dead, should surprise me with her easiest speech. I will take my thoughts to another place and time, perhaps also to another woman, and thus I will manage to deceive the divine, the last toothless laugh that looks at me every time I close my eyes, since the day I was born. I'll think about Zor's wife.

Zor, my friend, if I can so call you at the threshold of memories, at the entrance to the region in which you live. You didn't see how your wife confronted me that day. When I abandoned you in the forest with Markus, I returned to the village in search of your family. What you had discovered when we were young threatened me, and the image of your wife and your son offered me the answer to obtain your silence. They were so helpless that killing them would have been less difficult than wringing a cat's neck.

She was sitting in front of the campfire, waiting for you, looking up at the setting sun, where you would have come from before. Allow it to me. Your son Tol couldn't have been more than two winters old, and he played with a dog that licked his face. A dog three times his size, and I told myself that with a little fury incited, the animal would turn into a beast.

My men planted their spears in the barren land around your hut. They looked at me, collecting the ideas in my eyes, and went towards the dog. They took a while to anger him while they threatened him with kicks and stones. The boy screamed, calling for his mother, who was held against the ground by two other of my men. She was beautiful, Zor, even her desperation made her beautiful in ways I didn't think possible in a woman. She was, in that moment, her husband and her son at the same time, she possessed them in her eyes and in the movements of her fingers closing against the earth. Five equal, deep furrows, as if they wanted to find the water that would calm her anxiety.

Little Tol was looking at us, and he was silent. I will never know if he remembers anything from that day. The dog had become enraged, locked in a circle of men, growling and barking. Then I picked up Tol, and he began to move like a deranged wolf cub. I made the motion of throwing it into the circle where the dog was, but I didn't let it fall. The animal's saliva ran from the corners of its mouth, jumping and biting the air every time I pushed the child away. The dust spiraled with the early evening breeze that descended from the trees. The branches absorbed the last rays of the sun, and the chirping of crickets arose announcing the beginning of a ritual.

Afterwards, I don't know why I did it, there was no trace of fear or guilt, I tore a fragment of my clothes and blindfolded your son. The mother stopped crying. The silence was then heavier than the shouting of those who cursed me.

The dog was looking at me. I picked up the child again. Tol stretched out his arms and prayed to him to the blindness of the air in front of him. But I realized too late the hidden serenity of his voice beneath the thin shrillness of crying.

The voice of a child is the closest thing to the lost and virgin look of the newborn, to the caress of the gods. The voice they are learning to use, the meaning of the words that for the first and only time mean what they say. Such a discovery was capable of overcoming the walls of the circle of fear, of penetrating the dog's skull and speaking to the rudimentary mass of blood that barked, ate and procreated without pain or remorse.

Tol spoke.

He said, “Dog.”

The crickets fell silent. The breeze increased to cool the little one's heated cheeks. I felt a blush on my face, which I believed belonged to another who was no longer myself, Reynod the Witcher, but the previous one, the other, the double superior that I once was.

A child's gentle dog named Tol re-emerged from its claws and bristly hair, its fangs already hidden in its shamefully closed mouth. The men hurt

him with their spears to make him angry, and blood flowed from the wounds, but nothing seemed to bother him anymore.

I set Tol aside, but did not remove the blindfold. I went to your wife. I made her stand up, and got closer to her face. I smelled her skin, Zor, and I envied you. She did not move away from her, her body remained rigid as a log, but her scent betrayed her human material.

I called one of my men, but I didn't even look at him, my eyes were tied to your wife's, my nose to her scent. Then, they handed me a dagger. Your wife's eyes blinked at her gun, then stayed fixed on me. I rubbed her body with her blade, her sex, her breasts as heaving as if they contained two hearts. I reached her neck and her mouth. Her lips closed.

"For Zor," she murmured. She offered you even that. But she didn't cry. And I thought of myself, of the absence of that aroma by my side, forever. Women have, in my senses, the smell and taste of the earth, the hardness of the pebbles that return to knock us on our backs, definitively.

With the blood that flowed out, I painted my face with five lines. The men watched me, impatient and agitated, circling around me, afraid of the dawning darkness, more afraid than little Tol next to his dog.

Then I sank the blade like a stake into water. His body was so weak and fluid that I feared it would fall apart and scatter like ashes. She was that, ash and dust, water and mud, smoke. She was a woman, my friend Zor, as beautiful, searching and merciless as death is.

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Aristid had the bitter taste of blood in his mouth, and the cuts on his lips split open as he spoke. He spat his teeth loose. He touched his broken jaw and a swelling on the side of his face. He looked at himself in the reflection of the puddle where he went to wash his wounds. The skin on his left side had been almost completely torn off, and he seemed to have a double face.

He had to talk to Sorkus, he insisted on repeating himself, so that not even thepain distracted him from his next steps. Not attending the meeting was the same as refusing the peace agreement, and his father was right when he said that the rebels would not hold out much longer. His men continued lying on what had been the battlefield throughout that afternoon. The rest lay scattered and dead, fragments of bodies pierced by spears.

He began to walk, limping on his right leg. He didn't need to remove the skin that covered him to feel the still fresh wound. He dragged his leg, making grooves in the mud. His knee was like a huge burning stone.

The wounded were complaining and screaming. A hand grabbed hold of him. He looked down, and at the same moment his hand died closed around his foot. He had to force himself to open her fingers and continue, glancing at the open eyes of the corpses. He looked up past them, into the twilight that now offered them the rest he had not allowed them.

The world must be more beautiful without men. The human voice is noise, a horrible sting for the earth.

He thought of his father, anxious in the hut on the north hill to know the outcome of the battle. Messengers must have arrived, but he was probably hoping to see his son.

So talkative and convincing at times, the old man had not until then managed to get the old ideas out of Reynod's head. The last time they tried to talk to him, after several days of passing through the ranks of the guards, who upon seeing them said: "Not today, maybe tomorrow," the witcher had finally agreed to meet with them once again, but not before making a He reprimands Aristid for exposing his father to the cold.

The old armorer was tense, his body trembling as he helped him walk, perhaps anxious to hide his disadvantage in front of the witcher, that age difference that was not much, but that turned his old age into weakness and gave the other the attribute of strength. The old man's voice, however, sounded confident as he asked Reynod to listen to his son.

Aristid then took a deep breath of the cold air that passed in short bursts over the hill. He felt important for the first time. Despite having stopped being a child many winters ago, his father's gaze had always intimidated him. Caution, was the word most often repeated by the gunsmith, to obtain what he wants to achieve. But he thought the time had come when the rebels must break the obsolete rites of Reynod, and allow the world into the minds of his people.

For a long time he tried to convince his father. The crimes against Zor's family had been execrable and devoid of any real motivation. He even saw the armorer give in at times, but the strength of his principles always prevailed, and without bowing he had told him: “First we will prepare, otherwise all effort will be lost like the smoke of a recently extinguished bonfire. ”

That was why Aristid spoke with uncontrollable enthusiasm about progress, about the new weapons they had seen abroad, about the southern lands beyond the high mountains. He mentioned the ships coming to the

north coast, in the cultivation of the land in the west. But at each new idea that he proclaimed proudly and with a tone of hope, Reynod shook his head.

-I have already told you many times that my people will maintain their customs. I will not leave it in the hands of men worn down by godless spirits. I will not allow non-belief.

Aristid's lips then opened for the first cry of rebellion, but a finger of his father's hand emerged from between his coats. The finger was a small worm that those same birds flying overhead seemed to have been looking for. That finger made a slow but firm path towards his mouth, and rested on his serene lips, placidly and at peace.

Aristid did not speak, but his face made a gesture of disagreement, an involuntary tremor in the face of the same words he had heard until he was tired. They had spent the entire morning and part of the afternoon arguing. When they emerged, the sun had already set, and the birds were emitting hunting cries over the hill. Its violent flaps on the grass, its claws, sounded like suddenly broken jaws.

When they returned home, the women looked at them with sadness and reproach, because the eyes of war had already been drawn on the men's faces. Then, they went away with the children to gather the goats abandoned in the fields. The old man leaned on his son's shoulders.

"You should look at them as much as you can," he told her, while they watched the children struggle to gather the animals, and he listened to the laughter of the women who seemed to shine with the last rays of the sun falling on the dust. "The time will come when that all this will be nothing more than in your head, and you will have to settle. After the battles that will come, onlyand the memory will remain. Therefore, wait, son, postpone anger, and give the world one more day.

They entered the hut and drew the outline of their plans on wood, with charcoal tips.

That night, the fire illuminated the sallow faces of the men who arrived and entered to sit around the great diagram sketched on the boards. The family remained quiet in a corner, respectful of the men and elderly friends of the old man, all founders or heads of clans whose authority they would not dare disturb.

Aristid felt like an inexperienced child among those friends of his father. He had seen nothing of the world except the limits imposed by fear and obedience to Reynod. But the others had known distant lands when they were very young, they had seen men and women whose description amazed him and led him to places of darkness so that his imagination managed to make its way without the help of reason. He traveled with the words spoken in a dark corner of the forest, in the hut where the fire illuminated the mouths of the travelers, their eyes, which looked into the darkness but had

light as the essence of the events they related. When everyone was seated around the tables, each one announced the number of warriors they had, and the families under their care.

Many had finally been convinced after the forced march eastward, where they found only flooded lands. Aristid and the rebels, relegated to the back of the caravans, had arrived last at the enormous layer of sky reflected over the flooded fields. Dead trees rose from the water like peaks in the midst of a calm only disturbed by the breeze that swayed the waters. Every two or three nights, the rain fed the flood, and then the insects emerged to swoop down on the town on the shores of the lake.

The swarms arrived flying over the surface. The hum made the little ones cry, and the older children covered their ears. The women covered their children with branches or oils that the old women had prepared. A faint light was slowly forming in the opaque blue sky, hidden behind the thick layer of clouds laden with lightning. Reynod had insisted on installing them there, even when he himself had to endure the attack of the insects. From time to time he would say to those who asked him how long they were going to stay there:

-Imitate the gods. Have the virtue of patience. We were born from water, this is how it was revealed to me by Them, and that is why they will supply us in suffering. Pain will make us value the well-being that will come later.

The rites continued to be celebrated in the afternoons, and the fire rose from the bonfires with animal sacrifices, but the insects did not disappear with either the smoke or the fire.

Five summers and five autumns passed, and game became scarce. The children went into the lake in search of fish, but they were few in abundance in those still waters, only renewed by the rains. The men fought over the prey, and ate the raw fish before others stole them, still dirty with the strange bitter and black scales that covered them.

One day they saw an old man from the witcher's entourage vomit and pass water all afternoon. They said, the next day, that they had seen him that night fleeing from his hut toward the lake, raving and screaming as if the fire was chasing him. No one saw him again for ten days. They looked for him, his grandchildren waited for him on the shore. One morning, the lake returned the body covered in sores under the algae. They buried him without ceremony.

Reynod ordered that no prayers be given for the old man. The water had punished him. The water became impure because of the iniquities of men. The layer of filthy waste that was accumulating on the lake was the remains of impure bodies. That was the greatest test to be endured by the people that the gods had chosen, and the people, smelling the smell of the old man

that the waves had contemptuously thrown onto the beaches, complied with the punishment.

Children began to fall ill, and many died every day. The men no longer got up to hunt, they felt too weak. Many stopped going to the grasslands to evacuate, they did so between the huts separated by paths of stagnant water. Newborns could not live more than a day.

Aristid's family stayed away from the rest of the town. The old armorer then decided not to give the witcher any more opportunities.

"Reynod has rejected all requests and advice," he said to his friends at the assembly he gathered that night in his hut. "It's time to stop him." I am amazed that the day has come to have to say it, I, who have always insisted on peace. - He made a gesture of resigned regret, and staggered a little.

Aristid thought his father was going to fall, but the old man raised his hand to indicate that he was fine.

- I don'tI'm healthy. My heart fails and I am almost blind, so I will not be with you. But my son will carry two hearts in his chest into battle.

The men who decided to take command of the rebels were ten. Each one claimed to have no less than a hundred warriors at his disposal. Aristid, however, considered such numbers an overreaction of enthusiasm. These men were in middle age, some were already elderly, and had had a life only interrupted by sporadic feuds between clans. They had dreamed, perhaps, of being something more than simple men who reproduced and died like summer insects. But dominion and shame, like stakes that Reynod had raised above their heads, broke them. If nothing greater could be obtained with that magic that the witcher kept in his hands, if nothing could be achieved against the will of the gods who spoke through the mouth of Reynod, then there was nothing left but to resign himself to the passage of time and the oblivion of the land.

It was those same men who now had a smile of broken teeth under thin, crooked noses. Sparse hair and long beards. Chest hair like white feathers peeking out of their jackets. The incipient humps denouncing the age of the oldest.

Aristid was the only young man in the gathering, and he appreciated the venerated features illuminated by the bonfire.

The image we want. The one that we refuse to give up even though every reflection in each other's eyes shows us otherwise. The image that survives us and tolerates us.

They also had an altered vision of the small world that surrounded them. Their clans were so small that they would not have been able to resist

Reynod's forces for even two days. Furthermore, they were men not entirely convinced of their ideas. One morning they promised fidelity, and at night they rectified their commitment. But one of them asked to speak. He yawned before speaking, and looked at the ceiling in search of the beams of light that indicated the position of the moon between the cracks in the boards.

-We must decide the attack today. Without plans no one will be willing to support us. I can assure you that I will convince two hundred men, which is more than you can say. You know that the families in my group have always been faithful followers of Zor and his people.

The others approved with a murmur of satisfaction. The placidity on the old gunsmith's face was the first sign of relief for Aristid that day.

"My plan," the speaker continued, anticipating the question that Aristid had shown with his gesture, "is to attack when the rains start." The witcher's warriors are not used to fighting in the mud of the open fields. We are isolated and we have land to prepare. We have trees to build weapons, and I think the venerable armorer will remember what those that the witcher hid were like. I'm sure they won't even pay attention to our movements. The disease is decimating the people.

The man seemed satisfied with the firmness with which he had spoken. Although arrogant, he seemed sincere to Aristid, and such arrogance could be necessary to encourage the will of others.

"But how will we attack?" he asked.

Everyone looked at him as if he were a daring young man who was interfering in the conversation of the elders, however, no one answered him, while they looked at each other confused. Another, as old as the armorer, asked to speak.

-Friends. We've all had little internal struggles. Fights involving no more than thirty or fifty men. Recent events have stirred up the stagnant blood in our bodies. The strength of the younger ones - he said, pointing to Aristid - is shaking. I see it in his eyes, in the movements of his fingers as we talk, in those legs that don't want to stay still and force him to go around among these old men without much experience in war. Because the truth is that we don't know Reynod. We ignore its origin, what its mind has created and preserved before it came to us. What has he been, what has he done? I ask them. Do the gods speak to you? And if They support it, what awaits us but defeat and the death of our families?

The others looked at the armorer.

-I only tell you this because if we start the war, we must be honest about what we have. It is little, if you allow me the truth.

Aristid could no longer remain silent.

-Father, venerable friends of my father. I remember the day the witcher hid the weapons that my father brought from abroad, humiliating him in front of everyone. I saw him cry, and I reproached myself for the cowardice of my stillness. I saw him cry and I can still see it every time I look at his face.

A child's cough was heard behind the walls, followed by the laughter of some others. Aristid took advantage of the distraction to get rid of the crying that had knotted his throat, and shouted to his children to go to sleep. The stepsThey soon disappeared into the dark silence of the neighboring hut. She looked at her father, but he, distant and lost his weak attention, had his eyelids closed, his hands on his cane, and had placed a cloak over his shoulders and head to protect himself from the cold.

When she saw that they were letting him continue talking, she asked them to come and study the diagrams. She had torches brought and outlined his plans by drawing figures of men fighting. She erased and redrew others with charcoal, until everyone understood the plan he had devised during long restless nights, giving it the definitive form that he now presented to the judgment of the others.

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The pain that the gods feel. They die with me.

His voice is a whisper in the wounds that erase the limits of my skin and make my body a path to the world.

Their voices seem like those of sick children, dominated by ardor and delirium, only the whisper of their mothers still unites them with a thin thread of saliva to the rest of the world.

The sound of mothers singing, rocking them.

Always the sound of a woman, even at the end of everything.

Mother, here you are, still so lucid despite the time since your death. One also grows old in death, one gets tired of having died, perhaps.

I lose blood, and I'm afraid.

The furs of the cot on which Sorkus had laid him were becoming soaked with blood. His son was nearby, talking to the men probably about the battle. He didn't know how he had finished, or if he was still continuing. He was going to ask, but he realized that he couldn't open his mouth. He had a dry tongue. The air choked him, thinned by the mist of sweat and the spices

that his priests burned to ward off undesirable spirits. Blue smoke gathered under the roof of the hut. The braided leaves that protected them from the rain also prevented the escape of that aroma so similar to the heavy body of a mother with large breasts and an oblong head, with a grim look and a false smile. Squeezing him, ordering him to sleep with the crackling voice of the flames.

He raised a hand, pointing to the campfire, and looked at Sorkus. But he wouldn't be able to make him understand it and prevent that spirit that was forming in the hut from ending up drowning him.

There was liquid under his back. He seemed to be traveling in a canoe on a river of serene and thick waters. He turned his head, blinked, the dirt in his hair falling into his eyes as he moved. As he coughed, he spat out a mass as dense as the sea upon which his body had been placed. It was his body over his own body, the solid part of him over the liquid. Flesh and bones floating in the blood. And he saw himself ascend, ascend on a raft over an overflowing river. Reach the ceiling of the sky, the floor of the gods, the soles of the divine feet, and be crushed.

"No!" He screamed with enough force to overcome the gag that the gods had placed over his mouth.

Sorkus and the priests approached. Reynod made desperate gestures with his hands, precarious signs pointing to his back.

"There is a deep wound in the belly, Lord," one of the priests murmured.

But Sorkus knew that his father was knowledgeable about diseases.

"Help me lift him up," he ordered, and three of them turned him to his side.

His son's face had taken on the appearance of a frightened child, so different from the one he had had in battle.

"What's up?" the witcher asked in a very low voice.

-I don't know, father. There is a lump around the wound. - Then he looked at the priests who had checked the witcher, and reproached them for his mistake, threatening them with his fist.

-Useless old men, you haven't seen this wound!

Reynod said to Sorkus:

-Son... Britano must come.- But he couldn't speak anymore, because he heard the bustle of many people outside the hut. The voices of the guards tried to stop the crowd.

What do they claim? I took care of them like children all my life. I brought them to this wasteland of water where the gods sleep. This is his

bed, the impassive calm of water falling from the sky. The sky reflected in it, the faces of the gods that are no longer just voices. I have seen them from the shore. The sound of the waves announces them.

When I saw the extensive surface, I knew. He rained a curtain of thorns on the backs of the people. People followed me, amazed at having reached such sad desolation. Withered trees emerging from the dark water, gray clouds and lightning reflected like shadows on the shadows of the lake. They sat down to contemplate what they did not understand. The dogs began to howl, and the men looked at them in silence. The children cried. The young men had a common expression of drooping lips, hidden between their newly grown beards. Their backs were a single great wall facing the changing beach of the lake. Maybe they didn't see what only I was able to appreciate in all its beauty.

The gods were there, two on the surface of the water, walking, growing their terrible faces. Each face was a voice, the old voices that, after so long, were pious.

The howling of the dogs also grew louder. Those who tried to silence them only succeeded in infuriating them. Their jaws seemed to have been created for that howl that had words in its tones, like the end of sentences in a scream, muffled moans, tearful moans of females or children demanding food, silent salivations of old people who were exhaling their last breath.

The faces of the gods were satisfied. Their smiles, if those were the folds of the lips formed in the ripples of the water, if the dry branches of the trees were eyes, if the clouds inflated their pale cheeks. I never knew how many there were. Every time she looked, they grew in number and in turn were different. As if the ones I saw before had suddenly been erased, and when I looked again, they were not the same ones, but others to which many more had joined.

But I had arrived.

From the distant time of the trip with my father, from the first voices not understood, these were finally my Gods.

The grim faces that kept looking at me.

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Aristid watched the sun set behind the forest, beyond the field where they had been fighting. An orange halo surrounded the incomplete circle, flattened against the earth. A spot shone brightly inside the sphere, degenerating with the arrival of night.

But the color of gray bird wings dominated the entire horizon. Several flocks flew over the uncovered corpses. The men worked diligently to bury them, giving orders and using any tool, broken shields, spearheads, anything that would serve to remove the stone-hard earth deep inside. They dug, and their arms and backs shook with the blows, their faces also shook at the same rhythm, without taking their eyes off the ground. Then they picked up the bodies as if they were dead dogs picked up from the field after a night of hunting. It was that same indifference that was seen in their eyes, the forgetful insensitivity of habit. Others covered the graves, and suddenly stopped to look with curiosity, because they could not explain why the earth ran out before the grave was completely covered.

From time to time they talked to each other. They said that Reynod was in serious condition, that they had seen Sorkus carrying him in his arms. They had contemplated what they never thought possible: the one protected by the gods dying in the arms of his son, his head thrown back, his eyes open and tearful, his white hair moving with the swing of Sorkus' steps. The warriors' looks were so devastating that not only did they kneel as their leaders passed by, but for the first time, a hundred men, perhaps even the entire legion, had cried together.

"We need his advice," a warrior told him, panting after running to catch up with him. He had wet and dirty clothes, he was barefoot, and a wound made his left arm useless. - The northern group continues fighting, but they will not resist much longer. They ask for advice on whether they should continue or turn back. - The messenger looked down, embarrassed. - They know that we lost today, and they fear that we will abandon them.

-Tell them to resist without attacking, just for tonight. By dawn we will go look for them with reinforcements.

The messenger ran away. Then greetings of blessedness were heard from the darkness and the campfires, where the men were resting, quick hugs, slaps on the back and shouts. But the messenger did not stay long with each one.

Aristid walked towards Reynod's hut, on the other side of the field, behind the lines marked by the ranks of faithful warriors. To his left, he heard the patter of rain on the lake, on whose shore the town had been waiting for two winters to prepare for war. From time to time he saw groups of young people advancing to peer behind awnings and huts. The previously upright bodies, darkened by the eastern sun, looked weak and pale. The rainy seasons did not cease, the clouds being fed by the water of the great flood.

And since they arrived, fish mortality had become an uncontrollable plague. First there was that old man whose body was eaten by rats fleeing from the flooded burrows. Afterwards, the insects continued the disease in

the children. They woke up with swollen faces and unable to breathe, some died before swallowing the herbal sap that the old women prepared. Prayers were organized three times a day, led by the witch, who each night ordered preparations for the sick children to be bled. Those who survived looked at the dry, black cuts on their skin, covered with leaves in which smallWhite worms seemed to work to restore the normal color of the blood.

In the entire area you could only breathe the aroma of the substances that the old women cooked every morning, burning the nails of the dead mixed with the urine of the sick. Spells that the sorceress had taught them at night when she assumed the figure of an owl or between the flames of a bonfire in the forest. Aristid didn't believe in her, at least not in her magical gifts. According to her father, she was a strange old woman who must have died long before he was born, if she had ever really existed.

But the insects did not stop procreating. As the sun set over the stagnant waters, the insects laid their eggs. And before dawn, swarming clouds appeared suspended over the water, advancing towards the shore. Then the women ran to take the children to the wooden basins with oils.

One of those nights, while he was helping his children immerse themselves in the pools, Aristid had a peculiar dream. He saw many men running across the vast boggy plains to which the witcher had led them. He did not understand at first the meaning, nor why he was dreaming of immensities that he had never seen. The hunters never went out in groups larger than ten men, while the clans fought only over internal issues, grievances, theft of virgins, or the occasional unjust death. But that dream frightened him more than the sad, dark future that he saw falling on his people. They were hordes of angry men running, surrounded by the sound of drums, or footsteps, perhaps, that echoed on the dry earth, raising dust. And those imprecise shapes hit his face and clouded his eyes until he was watering like a child. Since then, he shivered at night, not because of the insects that would come out with the arrival of the sun, but when dreaming of those legions that crossed fields beyond which the world seemed to end.

One day they saw the witcher gathering his priests on the beach, around the altar in honor of the lake gods.

"What is he doing?" the old craftsman asked his son.

Aristid climbed a tree.

-There are many children on the shore, and they are putting them on a barge.

"But... what are those cries?" the old man said, anxiously, touching Aristid's legs that were hanging from a branch.

-It's the women, they are screaming for the children. What are they going to do with them?

The rain made his eyelids heavier, and the effort of his eyesight more painful for him. He wiped his face with his arm, but there was no way to wipe away the moisture that rose from his skin in beads of sweat. One of his sons had approached them, and he began to cry when he heard them. The old man gave him a light tap on the shoulder, challenging him.

-Wait, father, he's looking over there.- There was something strange in his son's eyes, and he asked him: -What do you see?

The boy did not answer right away. He raised one arm, one finger extended toward the lake. Her eyelids and his lips moved uneasily.

-There...there it is, father... look! It's...it's so big, oh, I don't know! ...there are many, one on top of the other... I'm afraid, I don't want to go, no...!

His voice grew into fear and tears covered his face. The little boy had urinated without realizing it, and his body trembled like a branch subjected to the winter wind. The grandfather tried to hug him, but the boy continued crying, always with his arm outstretched, and the other hand on his sex. Aristid came down from the tree.

-What do you see?!-He knew that his son was suffering, but also that this vision was unique, and that if he let it vanish into the uncatchable substance from which he had come, he would lose the understanding of the dream itself. of him, perhaps. He shook his son's shoulders as he continued to ask.

-Father, don't let them take me! They take them into the water, all of them!

Then Aristid saw what his son saw.

Reynod makes a new sacrifice to the lake gods.

That afternoon, the family and everyone who decided to follow them packed up their things and walked even further away from the rest of the town. During the following week he organized groups to explore for caves. He ordered the women to gather every plant that would serve as food, and the men to go hunting in the forests, not stopping until they stored enough prey to supply themselves for a long time. The father recovered the anxiety of his youth, and began to teach the construction of spears and bows to the younger ones. Other men joined Asistid and accompanied him at night to listen to his plans.

-Enough of sacrifices. Reynod is massacring us. Let's stop being victims offered to his gods.

Those who still believed in the divinities murmured with their eyes fixed on the fathoms.

"These are the gods..." Aristid insisted, killing an insect that had landed on hisface- …and they are devouring us along with our children.

The moon had been seen before midnight, and men were then able to look into the eyes, stripped of all thoughts of excuse or guilt, at the features of the past and the memory free of fear of punishment. One of them stood up.

-The only family that has confronted him was Zor's, and we don't know what has become of all of them. That's why we are afraid. But there are many of us, and I don't believe in the gods who defend him. I doubt that the Witcher is more than an ordinary man, who bleeds and dies like anyone else.

The others talked among themselves, while the fathoms shone with the puff of their breath. The moon set again. The women appeared, bringing pots and food, and left as silently as they had arrived. A cry escaped from the darkness towards them, and someone reminded the children of the barge, which had to continue moving, slowly, towards the center of the lake.

"Are we going to save them?" asked a voice under a goatskin that protected the throat from the cold of the night.

-Taking a risk is dying. When we are strong, we will win.

But he was thinking about his son, who had not been able to regain his calm since the day they saw the boat. The boy's eyes would not stop looking towards the lake, even when they dragged him away, or put blindfolds over his eyes. His head turned, sooner or later, in that direction.

-This is what I have planned.

In the dust and under the torches, he drew the steps for battle.

-Here and on the other side of the mountains we will be. A central group will be in charge of surprising them. When they try to flee from the sides, our flanks will stop them. Afterwards it will be a man-to-man fight, and for that we must train.

"But we are few," one objected, while he rubbed his beard, as if he were trying to remove the doubts.

-My father's elderly friends are heads of many families who oppose Reynod. Leaders we will not convince unless we show them our decision. Father has influences on them. They hold a grudge against the Witcher and will help us. Tomorrow we will start training. Go to sleep.

They walked away from the campfire with worried faces about the decision they had just made. Some knelt and prayed. Others walked with their wives, who had come to look for them. Some solitary people, chewing leaves, lay down in their beds, thinking of the fight that awaited them. But

everyone looked at the lake at least once before falling asleep, smelling the stench that came from there.

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The knife cut the remains of the warrior's leg. A spear had broken the bone below the knee, and during the wait outside the hut, it had become a brittle fragment like charcoal, with the smell of the larvae working and eating away at it.

The warrior screamed, as the others had done shortly before, and as the others would later do when passing through their hands to remedy the incurable, for the almost useless gesture of giving them preparations to drink or cutting off the destroyed parts of their bodies.

"Another one!" Britan shouted to his assistants, who ran to replace the knife that he had used since the morning and was no longer sharp. Some, whom his father or he himself had trained, worked diligently. But the wounded wanted only him to heal them.

"I want the son of the Great Chief," they said, raising their heads a little in the arms of those who carried them from the battlefield, in the midst of the death rattles, the cold and the delirium that formed worms in front of their eyes. Small snakes that their minds felt in their legs, in the hollows of their bellies, in the arrows stuck and erect like rays of sunlight. The men ripped them off, but the tips remained inside.

Britan knew he couldn't care for them all. His father, from whom he had learned about the body of men, who had given him lessons on the form and function of organs with the corpses of men who killed especially for that purpose, was already old and too busy with the war. Now the witcher was a warrior who sent the wounded to his son. He turned his attention to the man screaming in his hands. He touched the broken leg bone and began to cut it.

-So high!

The assistants held up the stump for him to stitch. He felt that his resistance was also breaking. He had been standing for a whole day, and the line of wounded was still very long. The rain pierced the roof and a thin curtain of water fell on them. He put a paste of clean leaves on the wound, they took the sick man and brought another.

-Sir! -They called him from the entrance.- They need him in his father's hut!

"You continue," he said, rubbing his eyes and abandoning the instructions. ments in the hands of others.

Outside, there was a long line that stretched until it was lost in the haze of dust and the advancing night. When they saw him leave, they surrounded him, but he only paid attention to a group around something he couldn't see. They gave way, a spearman had half of his skull open, and a red mass with splinters of bone hung from the wound.

"He's still breathing," someone said.

He already knew it, but he wouldn't waste his time. He grabbed a handful of dirt and dropped it on the man's face. The others left the body where he was.

He felt a hand take his shoulder, and suddenly he found himself wishing, against what had been his temperament until then, nothing more than to close his eyes, no matter who it was that was seeking him now, and rest. Then images of unknown places rushed into his eyes as they did in dreams.

I will travel across the sea that my father denies. I will know the world and the men that my father denies. The shores that are above us, born before, wiser even than our fathers. The discoveries that travelers have told me about, the prosperity that my father denies.

His eyes opened again and he turned around. The fingers that had touched him mingled in his long, straight hair. The straight nose, the black eyebrows, the wide forehead that dripped sweat, the cut lips, the yellow teeth, his entire face reflected fatigue. Sorkus was looking at him.

"You are going to sleep after seeing our father," he heard him say, and he led him through a path with the stench of the dead, the warm warmth of the nocturnal autumn darkly hidden by that sweet aroma of rotting flesh. The patter of rain sounded in the puddles around the bodies, cleaning them of dirt, tears of the gods falling to unearth the few who had been buried that afternoon.

-We will have to bury them again tomorrow. If the rebels leave us.

Sorkus's face had grown angry again, but his brother heard only the words, thinking of Reynod.

-How is he?

-Evil. He's been dying since sundown, but I knew you were busy with our men.

Britan stopped to look at his brother, the imperturbable mask that sometimes looked so much like Reynod's face, as if it had been molded not from birth, but with the winters. And that rigidity was why he had to make decisions like the one that night. As if his father was already dead, or he needed that death to justify his decision.

-Don't look at me like that, by all the gods I ask you. - Sorkus had said this in front of him, but with his eyes turned away, his eyelids wet from the rain, his curly hair and beard wet, the only thing that seemed differentiate it from Reynod's face. He had murmured those words almost as faintly as the moans that came from the wounded hut.

Britan thought he saw Sorkus's chin tremble, perhaps from the cold, and he placed the palm of his hand on the other's forehead, who made a sullen gesture, but allowed himself to be touched.

-You're sick, we better get there soon and take something that I'm going to prepare for you.

When they entered the large cabin, the incense greeted them with the dense bluish mass that was looking for cracks through which to escape into the night. Sorkus offered him a knowing look as he once again saw the priests' futile efforts. Britan made a gesture of anger at the smells that the priests had created with mixtures burned in the fire, aromas that would have frightened the very gods whose favors they sought to regain.

"Get the fake ones out of here!" he shouted.

Reserved whether it was about war or everyday life, he seemed to open his soul now, expose his skill in the dexterity of his movements and the quickness of his ideas. The long winters spent exploring the corpses that his father sent him to study, the painstaking effort to achieve the knowledge that the witcher had not achieved, confronted him with the old rites that the priests imposed and that Reyunod had not wanted to completely distance himself from. Because the witcher knew that magic had elevated him to the place where he was, and although he seemed proud of his son, the intelligence that was developing in Britan, that instinct to see illness, worried him.

The guards came in to take the old priests away.

-I need helpers, at least two, and the material that I keep under my bunk.

Sorkus sent for them. Britan approached the old man's body, opened his eyelids and checked his paleness. The red stain on the cot had turned into a thick crust, partly cracked by the heat of the campfire. The old man did not move, but his breath, still warm, warmed Britan's face.

Sorkus began to tell him what they had seen on his father's back. They turned it around. The original lump had been transformed into a frpurple uta that secreted a thick yellow liquid.

-There must have been an arrow stuck since this morning.

The others looked at him and declared his ignorance with a gesture of boredom and guilt.

"Or maybe a rock or a splinter," he said, toning down his reproachful tone. "We have to open it, brother." If it is there we will remove it and that will be able to stop the disease.

Then he took off his wet clothes. He rubbed his body to dry himself, and noticed that his body was suffering, but it was necessary to stay awake. He had not eaten anything all day, although he did not want to taste anything but water before curing his father. At the back of the cabin, he saw one of her sisters, the one he had been destined to join, and with her he moved away from her to a corner.

The white robe that covered her swung like black hair on her shoulders. Britan murmured something in his ear. Then she got behind her and started rubbing her back. The warm hands that relieved him from the sweat, from the cold rain, that unknotted his rigid and tense flesh, that took him away from the eyes of the wounded, from the tremors and sobs, from the cut bodies.

"Everything is ready, Lord," an assistant told him, leaving them in almost darkness again when he withdrew with the torch.

Britan woke up from that gentle meadow of intense green in which he had begun to dream. He saw the darkness in the corner and the light in the other sector, but he no longer saw his sister, he only had the memory of those hands on her body. She had molded him once more after the confusion in which his mind had wandered all day. From the memory of so many sad faces, he returned almost unscathed.

He finished dressing in dry clothes and returned to his father. Sorkus was gone. His assistants had washed the body, which looked as pale as it must have when he was a child. The old man, who never had much of a beard, regained the appearance of his childhood. But they did not dare to remove his loincloth, because Reynod had expressly said never to do so.

-I'll take it out.

Britan knew that his father's pride would not be diminished by his son doing it. They placed the body on its side and on the healthy side. He stood in front and began to cut the fabrics. The others remained behind the old man's back.

When he undressed him, he wasn't sure what he had seen. The shadow of the thighs covered the sex. He lifted her thin, aged leg. The hair had been lost, or he had never had it if he judged by Reynod's sparse beard and broad, smooth white chest. The shadow of sex was also white.

Then he saw a pink, misshapen scar, which he believed must be a burn, or the remains of an illness. He meditated before examining her carefully, because he wanted to preserve the intimacy that his father's body and

authority demanded. He covered it again, but the restlessness no longer left him.

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The edge cuts. At first it doesn't hurt. Then comes the pain.

My voice falls, disperses in the waters, collapses in sleep. I am falling, and the pain pushes me, not like a crushing hand, but like the weight of a burden.

Pain also has a weight as specific as the reason that causes it. And it is not just one, there is never a single pain that is strong enough to create itself. They are one by one those who are born and join together. Pains that do not seem to be pains as soon as they arise, but rather fragments that are linked together.

The pain is round. Hard, white and circular. Similar to the sun. It heads through the world like an oblong seed, along the gentle slopes of the mountains. Drag stones that take on new shapes. They get rid of their garments and show the caves of their bodies of pain.

Thus the pain grows, and rises to our backs.

It is a crust of dirt that cannot be removed except by amputating a part of the body.

They are opening me up.

The pain gives way to the crackling of the bones. The cover of my heart opens like an arch through which a hand penetrates. It touches the heart and sets it aside. Explore. Expert and confident. He knows what he does.

It goes down towards the belly, but it must meet the pillars and the dome of the world of my body. Air enters. It shouldn't happen, and the hand doesn't know it yet. The hand of the man who must be my son.

The fingers meet my back, go down it, inside, touching a large, long, pulsating cylinder. They stop. They doubt.

The feeling that no one knows, not even oneself, what is there, and one behaves like a god, beautiful like the god of that moment. Nobody knows what he is touching and what he will do with that fragment of the man in his hands.

Maybe his soul is there, maybe that flesh is the answer to the iniquities of the world.

Creation between the fingers, between the strength of the fingers, and doubt as the only instrument of that force.

The day Markus returned, he didn't expect to see him again after the comcompetition with Zor. He thought he was far away, humiliated by what the entire town knew, the shame of not having known how to confront an animal from the forest. But many had seen him recover, and such news had reached him.

Markus came limping through the crowd, one leg severed below the knee. He leaned on his son when he walked. The bent over boy was holding his father's stump on his back, and he was crying. Seeing both of them, Reynod knew that he had to do anything to silence Markus' voice. Even if he ignored the accusations he believed were inevitable, the damage to his authority would have already been done.

They made way for him as the man and his son advanced, dragging stones along the path that led to the altar, among the pools of the lamb's blood. Markus was sweating under the sun that illuminated his white hair with light blonde highlights. The son seemed like a shadow at his father's feet. Then, he stopped in front of the witcher. A ray of sunlight reflected on the knife stuck in the lamb, blinding them for a moment.

"I'm here to cure me," said Markus.

Reynod had been told that Markus's screams echoed from his hut every night until they invaded the entire forest. They weren't words, just meaningless screams cutting through the night air until his voice was tired. What he heard now was a similar voice, cracked and broken.

"You are going to cure me," he repeated, not as an order, he had no strength for that, but simply as a statement that had already been fulfilled beforehand.

Reynod did not answer. People were waiting for his response. He took off his ceremonial robe and covered Markus's trembling back. The others made a gesture of admiration and slowly left. But when he was out of the gaze of the people, he felt insecure in front of the gaze of the other. The priests were still there, and he needed to get rid of them. He ordered the child to be taken away. Reynod followed the sick man's slow steps towards the hut. The last branches were being placed on the roof, tied with braids of reeds.

-Leave that for tomorrow.

The men left, the guards left Markus. Now alone, they seemed wary of breaking the silence. They talked about Zor.

"I haven't seen him, it's the best for him," said Reynod.

-He has become discouraged after the death of his wife. But I'm not afraid of you, and I want you to give me my leg back.-Then he began to untie the cloths that wrapped the stump. The layers of cloth were opened one by one, and at the same time that he took them out, some leaves placed on the wound absorbed the blood and suppuration that flowed without stopping. When the last one came off, Reynod saw that his leg looked like it had just been amputated.

-How have you kept it like this?

-I didn't do it, but the same old sorceress who cursed me by giving me a dead leg every two or three days, and forcing me to cut it off myself or my son. I ask you to stop his curse, healing me forever.

-But...- The witcher fell silent when he realized that he was going to say out loud what he had never even said to himself.

-That everything is a lie? -said Markus. -A false word incarnated in the body of a man. I know. But your voices and your gods have intrigued me since we met, and this doubt has grown with my desperation.

Reynod knew he had to do something. The people were out there, waiting for the time of the next prayer, the priests would come to look for them, the men were also waiting for them for the evening Assembly. But he thought about the part of his life that only that man knew. That memory that he could not eliminate, that he would not disappear even if he buried it as deeply as possible in the land of oblivion. A resistant fragment of the lives of men was such memory, a bone as unbreakable, or perhaps even more so, than the will of a god.

That's what it was about, Markus's leg bone, whose hands offered it to her as if he were a sleeping child. A child or a leg, in this case it was the same. Giving him life was something he had never done. For a moment, a short period of time in which he had almost allowed himself to be convinced, he closed his eyes and prayed. But he soon realized his fallacy: he did not know how to pray except out loud, in front of his subjects, and he did not glimpse the gods except in those moments, by raising his arms and gesticulating. The rest of the time they had always been just sounds, words that he uttered even when he was asleep. Voices said and heard simultaneously, and that had kept him lucid: letting out the guttural voices that his body emanated. Exercises and games of the gods, laughter that echoed in his viscera, and they secreted sap and liquids, air expelled in the form of words.

He then tried again to act on him, as he did before his followers, but Markus interrupted him.

-I don't need your rites! Just touch my leg, blindly, or dip it in the saliva or feces of your body! nfertile, and make it live!- Markus's face had lost its sad serenity to become fury, while he rested his leg on Reynod's chest.

The witcher stepped back, and Markus fell to the ground. And seeing him like that, he felt safe again.

-Don't threaten me if you have no way to comply.

He was not going to be forced to do anything. Markus was just a piece of a man in his hands. And he only had to utter his thought to finally defeat him.

-This leg is more alive than the rest of your body.

Markus groaned.

Reynod then considered a gesture of mercy appropriate.

-We will treat your leg like a son. I'm going to get you up and you'll help me carve the tool that you should always have at hand from now on.

He made Markus lie down with his leg on a board. He went in search of a container wrapped in cracked leather. Inside were instruments made of carved wood and rocks of different edges. He sat down on a bench, took off the rest of his ceremonial clothing, and began to work.

Markus watched him open his muscles, lift them like dry scales, like burned skin. But he didn't hurt. The witcher put all the fine precision of his fingers into the work, looking at him from time to time, and Markus nodded, not knowing to what, whether to the question of whether it was true that it did not hurt him, or resignedly accepting Reynod's task.

-Sir...- said a voice from outside.

-Today we will suspend everything- answered the witcher.

In his left hand, the birch branch clamp moved like a small insect; On the right, the edge of a white stone began to dig into the bone, until it was separated from the rest. Reynod then thought of his stiletto, and went in search of it.

"What a beautiful structure is that of man!" Reynod said, free of the dryness that lived in his expressions, of the apparent indifference and the hidden emptiness that was his usual mask. Something had burst into his eyes as he saw the world and the endless variety of it every time he was allowed to explore the bodies of men. He looked at Markus once more, and handed him the stiletto.

-You are a hunter and you have carved your own spears. Now carve the knife with your own bone.

Markus took the stiletto, but his hands were shaking. A cold wind blew through the boards of the hut. The mid-afternoon sun was falling at his face level, forming lines of light and shadow between the cracks. Reynod limited

himself to observing him, while the other, bare of flesh, the bone yellow due to the remains of fat that covered the surface, began to carve.

Markus's forehead was sweating, but he had begun to be overcome by an impetus that was not going to stop if he wanted to finish his work. Just one moment for him to stop was enough to never start again. That's why he carved, even though he cried with his shoulders hunched and swallowing his tears.

When he finished, it was night. Reynod was still at his side, not to control the task, but to observe Markus's slow fall. To ensure that the work that kept him alive was the same that would later make him succumb.

Markus looked up. His colorless hair reflected the glow of the flames. He was no longer tremulous. His hands held the new knife, contemplating it in the light of the fire. It was no longer than his open hand, white, with faint tints of mushroom green and old-age browns. It had a slight convexity on each face, and a protuberance at the base of the bone for cutting and crushing. The end tapered to a point that Markus ran through one of his fingers to test the edge.

Reynod was amazed at the skill demonstrated in that craft. Markus had known how to use the thin front edge of the bone as a cutting edge. He had searched for the plot hidden in his own skeleton, until he found the terrible smile of the bones. That from his tears, from the mark that his certain fall would leave later, such a beautiful instrument emerged, made him think about the contradiction of the gods, the incomprehensible gift that they gave to someone who was soon going to be nothing more than a wandering beggar

Then he extended a hand towards Markus's face. With the back of her fingers she caressed his cheek and his beard. Perhaps the other would not even notice it, perplexed as he was by contemplating his little work. With just two fingers he touched Markus's skin, and he knew it was enough. That he, the sparsely bearded man, consoled the man absorbed in gazing at the object of his ultimate glory and despair. He withdrew his hand. He noticed that he was sweating.

-From today you will cut off your dead man's foot with this weapon, and the curse will stop.

Markus looked at him once more before leaving. His pale eyes observed him from beneath the shadow of his hair. The knife was already stored among his clothes.

The hand reaches the mouth to breathe. The entry into the belly of the air that children exhale when they run. He plays with the body as if it were his own, that strange hand.

The air is pain. re like the wind that enters the bodies of sick children. The hand explores, digging as in the earth, blindly. Further down, to the roots, the bones that open into lines of white, gray, brown ropes, extending on the inverted branches of the tree. They feed and absorb the sap, the blood. He touches them, and they hurt, always, each element has the capacity of voice and scream.

The hand feels a mass of smelly liquid. The sense of smell of the viscera knows it before man. The stagnant liquid is born and recreated. It builds up, and it's hot. Its color is that of the afternoon sun. The sun is also in here. The hand touches it, but the sun dissolves and dies. He cracks, pouring out the liquid of his death from his insides. The sun consumes the vitality of creation.

The fingers try to break the bubble of the sun. But they are not alone. Something hard is between them, with an edge.

The pain. An explosion followed by the dense calm of the air, before the abyss. The collapse is approaching. I can not think. I fall. My thoughts drift away, they don't belong to me. I see him stay on the edge of the mountain.

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A forest of men looked like the lines of guards he approached. And all of them had eyes shining with the brilliance of the rain.

They looked at him, and Aristid knew he recognized himself. They had seen him fight fiercely, and for that they respected him. It was that same bravery that took him to the enemy's camp for the peace agreement, if he managed to reach such an agreement.

He moved slowly, sore from his wounds, forced to cross earthen cairns and branches that had served as walls and fences in front. He couldn't cross the big puddles without risk of slipping on his weak leg, so he had to go around them, and his back began to bother him then too.

Long before seeing the guards, the field and the dead were a single smooth black surface under the gray cloak of the sky. The lake did not seem to be made of water, but rather a part of the fallen sky, always still, similar to a desolate era of rock-hard earth, and he felt again the nauseating aroma of the lake.

Now closer, he could see the backs of the bodies floating in the water, and he imagined them exhaling the fetid remains, empty even of the thoughts that once inhabited them, and these also seemed to have turned black, thick as the waters. . Very far in the distance, he thought he saw the boat of sacrifice, but he was not sure he could distinguish it.

He raised a hand toward the front row, showing the palm on which he had drawn a blue circle. Then, with one finger, he drew a new circle on his forehead, and thus he confirmed that he came on a mission of peace. He turned his head from side to side, indicating that he was alone. He was going to say something, but the cry of a flock of crows that at that moment descended on the piled corpses, dissuaded him from his attempt. He knew it was too late to ask for the bodies of his men, as the enemies were already dragging them into the water.

The guards opened to let him pass, and closed again behind him.

-Messenger in peace!- Was the voice that was repeated from man to man along the path that led to Reynod's cabin. No one approached him to escort him. There were groups working on carving and building weapons around the campfires. The twilight sun could still be seen, hidden behind the dense clouds suspended over the lake, surrounded by a yellow halo, opaque and dry like the center of a dead bone.

He waited for Sorkus to come looking for him, he didn't feel safe walking among the men who were silently watching him. He had stopped, and he felt that this caused concern in those who were watching him, he assumed that the questions and pushing would soon begin. But none of this happened. It was his mind that revolved around possible fears, remembering at the same time the gesture that Sorkus had made to him that afternoon while they fought.

They were both fighting. Sorkus was trying to get rid of a rebel who kept threatening him with his spear, and Aristid had a warrior on top of him looking to cut his neck. He managed to separate himself and stabbed her in the chest. Then his gaze met Sorkus's as he disposed of his enemy with an ax blow to the belly. Neither of them knew with certainty who had made the first gesture. Perhaps it was a misinterpreted sign that changed the ideas one had of the other until that moment. A change that seemed to them like a haven of clear water between the sad waves of the lake. One of the two made the circle movement on their forehead, perhaps just to wipe away the sweat. But it was enough for the other, with his eyes fixed on the enemy, to make the same circle in the palm of his hand.

His gaze then turned away without haste or fear, certain of something that would happen later, when the battle was over. Whatever the result, on the firm rock of the encounter, at theprecise time, a new thought would be created. That day they would continue fighting, but a rope had loosened between them, although their hands battled and their eyes searched for enemies, and mercy had no place other than not to kill one man at a time.

Then one of his people had grabbed him by the arm, pointing to his leg, and only then had he realized that he was hurt.

-How are the other forces? -He asked.

-Resisting! The plan is maintained but without progress. The faithful tried to flee along the sides of the lake, but they could not. We lack men.

-Which front is the weakest?

-The East.

-Let them withdraw, there is only the river ahead, and let them reinforce the western front. Let them attack without mercy! Did you hear me? -He grabbed the man by the hair, holding his head as if he were going to kiss him goodbye or smell his hair to remember him.

"No mercy!" repeated the voice of the one who would carry the message, and he ran away.

The faithful forces of the east advanced, certain of the defeat of the rebels, but delayed their march as they skirted one of the tributaries of the Droinne. They only had to walk along the slopes of the mountains that stretched to the west.

The rebels joined the remaining front, and advanced strongly at first. Aristid had not been there, but he heard the first messenger's story. The young man had arrived while he was thinking about the losses of that afternoon.

-Sir...we made progress yesterday. The faithful fell into a plain so vast that they cannot see the end. We continue walking with the taller men ahead to spot enemies. We crossed three very wide rivers, hoping to reach the lake. Finally we saw its reflection in the sky. The lake had risen, Lord, believe me!

The messenger had started crying, and Aristid did not understand.

-The lake rose in all its depth to the sky, and hung as if it had ropes that tied it to the fingers of the gods. We stared, confused and wondering if it was a dream in the middle of the battle, or if the fight was a dream. It had gotten even darker and it started to rain. The grass fell apart and the mud formed very quickly. The waters of the lake overflowed and fell like rain on us. We couldn't continue anymore. We slipped when we tried to walk, and were blinded by a haze of dust in the rain. The first ranks were defeated and we had to retreat. The boss ordered us to wait. I was sent to you, Lord, to ask for advice.

That was the first time that afternoon that he ordered them to continue until the end of the day. He did it again several times when the messengers returned with new news. But the last one was not allowed to return. He would wait for the outcome of the meeting with Sorkus that night.

Sorkus left the witcher's hut. He walked towards him, alone. The look was neither dazed nor resentful. He was a warrior and nothing more. He was skilled at what he did, an excellent fighter with whom he would not dare fight hand-to-hand. Sorkus's long, curly hair fell wetly on his neck, illuminated by the strange luminosity that always came from the lake.

Aristid wondered, as he watched him approach, how much longer his own daring, the deception, the simulation of forces and legions that he did not have, would last before Sorkus realized it.

The moon had risen briefly. It seemed, behind Sorkus's head, to have a thousand other heads similar to those of Reynod's son. The contours danced a dance of mountain river water, a colorless mist rising in contrast to the darkness of the sky. But inside the sphere, the figures were still, afraid of being surprised when the clouds cleared, as if they were opening after love or a crime.

Aristid knew that not everyone, even if they looked from the same place, would see the same thing. Because he came to see a world with a surface of thick, hot milk, fresh from the udders of the female of the sun. The one that hides when the morning rises and appears, proud or pale, but complete, only one day every twenty-eight nights. This he could not explain to Reynod's sons. The advantages of predicting the seasons, of settling on the plains and working the land. Learn from foreigners the ability to navigate rivers and build carts that covered distances greater than feet could ever achieve. And above all, abandon the blood of the gods. All of this was a dream glimpsed in the stories of those who had traveled, men that his father had once met and of whom he had only heard.

"What are you looking for?" Sorkus asked him, with his moon crown on his head. He looked neither angry nor calm, just indifferent, perhaps tired. Neither of them had slept for several days before.

-How is your father, have they told me that he is injured?

Sorkus nodded, hands up. his back, his chin up and his eyes red.

-My brother is in charge of healing him. But don't celebrate his misfortune, I am here to continue his task.

Aristid made the peace gesture, the circle on his forehead.

-We did this in the middle of the battle, and I want to believe it meant something.

-Let's not waste time, the men must sleep and I must watch over my father.

-My proposal is that your father open the limits of the town and let the teachers in to teach our children what we don't know. There are countless things behind those mountains and beyond the sea to the north.

-And what will become of our virtues?

-Which is it? For almost fifty winters your father has ruled us with gods we have not seen, and who bring no benefits other than those he sees.

Sorkus looked at the guards, but he himself had told them not to intervene and to stay away while he spoke to the rebel.

-Don't provoke me, because you won't get out of here alive.

-Then my men will enter, and even if they are exhausted, they will crawl to attack you with fists and teeth. They won't give in, I promise you!

Seeing that the meeting was fading into futile threats that none of them could carry out, at least not until his men recovered, Sorkus began to compose himself.

-Why are you so angry about attacking us? They have always lived away with their families and in peace.

-You don't see it because you are within Reynod's influence. But we know that in the face of the most measly attempt to separate us definitively, he will pull the rope with which he holds us. I will ask you a question that will answer you. Would your father let you stay away from him?

Sorkus had begun to think, with his eyes lowered, drawing a circle on the ground with his foot that he erased and redrawn. The moon, peeking out from time to time, seemed to love his hair, making it look almost white in the middle of the night. Aristid did not know how old Sorkus was, but he was the oldest of the three brothers, and older than him.

-I fear the gods. Sometimes, I also think I hear them in the lake water, talking to me.

-You fear your father. He has convinced you of them since you were a child.

-Is not true! The healings he has done are works of the gods. How to deny it?!

-But what is the number of those he has saved? My father told me that everyone he saved died later when they were supposed to. Healing yes, not divine acts. Your father taught all this to your brother, and he does not talk about the gods but about men and phenomena of the natural world. The truth is around you, just like this moon that we cannot deny.

Aristid took him by the arm, and pointed towards the large white sphere that was hiding again. A sound of spears and footsteps was heard, very close, and he felt in danger.

-I think your men will kill me.

Sorkus raised an arm to indicate that everything was fine.

-What I mean is that if your father dies, you will have the opportunity to change things. We don't need to fight.

-You are asking too much of me, even if I shared your ideas. I am afraid of the gods because I believe in my father. The image of him and his voices repeat in my memory every day. He has taught me everything I do, he has seen me do it and he has corrected me time and time again. I think in his way and I will no longer be able to get used to another. I will grow old thinking like my father. He is here.-And he pointed to his head.-When we were young, we could have been friends, that's why I tell you this. But if you repeat it, I will not only deny it, but I will kill you by calling you a liar.

"The war..." Aristid murmured.

-We didn't choose it, our parents gave it to us. Hasn't yours spoken to you? Each one of them is a confusion and a failure. A doubt that surrounds us and gets into our heads until it becomes flesh.

-But I am convinced of what I say, I am right, right? -And he seemed to be looking for consolation now.

-It doesn't matter anymore. Go back to your people and tell them that you will abandon the cause, that you will live alone without caring what happens to us. You will see that they will not leave you. They will not allow you solitude, and yet you will find yourself as alone as a dog among wolves.

"The war..." Aristid repeated, crestfallen, and he turned to walk away.

-Tomorrow morning my forces will attack!

He heard Sorkus shout, not for himself but for the men to hear. Everyone, the wounded and the guards, moved in the darkness and cheered.

"May your gods die!" answered Asistid.

Sorkus gave the order to let him return safely. Then he was able to cross back through the enemy camp, surrounded by voices that cursed him, but with no more injuries than the ones he had arrived with.

"The war..." he continued murmuring, as he approached the bonfires of his people, thinking about the warmth of the flames that awaited him.

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The faces twist in the water, I don't recognize them. The pain confuses me. But where does the pain live? I lift my eyelids. My eyes see the shadows of those who protect me. Next to the door, the guards. To my left, the fire warming this side of my body excavated by the hands of men as if it were made of earth. Me, my own grave.

On the other side, the priests insist with incense to ward off death. They do it as I have taught them, but with an effort that seems more like condescension than desire. They don't realize what is behind the flames. Beyond the light, in that corner where no one goes because no one likes the darkness when someone is dying.

He is once again there. The Other has returned. He sits in that dimly lit corner that does not seem to be part of a place, but rather a fragment of the night torn away and fallen like something abandoned. And he lives there, just like the insects that breed under the rocks, the worms that procreate a perennial world in the shadows of the stones.

He doesn't move, at least he hasn't since I woke up, but I've gone back to sleep, anxious not to see him anymore when I open my eyes again. I fear him because he doesn't talk to me. So similar to me, he nevertheless has that smile that renews envy like an unclosed wound.

The wound in his side hurt, the edges still open so the fluids could continue to ooze. They had placed him with his body half inclined to the left. He felt like a man of water that never finished emptying, a skeleton covered in perforated leather.

He had opened his eyes, without answering his children's questions. He closed them again, and his mind entered a raft that someone was dragging across the battlefield, while hundreds of lifeless beings made their way to abandon him. Emptying it.

He was thirsty, but he couldn't speak.

The same thirst as him when he was young, when he saw his father next to him when he woke up. He knew what they had done to him, even seeing the marks of the ropes on his hands, feeling the numbness of his face from the blows, his wounded lips. The taste of his blood quenched his thirst throughout that day, until one of the following cold nights he heard the farewell of the man who had helped his father. They held hands in the dawning light, and he watched them go. A dog started licking his hand. He looked toward the light again. They turned several times to look at him, but his father looked down at the ground. Then he approached her.

"I will say nothing from today, I will not reproach you for your hatred," he told her.

He parted his lips to answer. A scab fell off and blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. The father approached to clean him up, but he turned his head away. The dog licked his cheek and lips.

Seven days later, he began to get up and walk slowly, holding his breath as the wound reopened. But over time, an extensive and thick scar formed, which gave him the sensation of having the bark of a tree, of becoming a vegetable. That was, perhaps, nothing more than a trunk incapable of bearing seeds.

At night he cried, but seeing himself bleeding and the pain distracted him from despair. He realized that the same pain saved him from jumping into the river or stabbing himself with his father's knife.

Sometimes he would go to the shore, where the waters were still carrying plague victims, and try to urinate. The dog accompanied him, looking at him, sitting next to him in the moonlight, and whimpered. The night passed, and in the morning he was asleep face down, wet in the urine that had gushed out without warning while he rested.

In the afternoons, his father would shelter him with sheep skins, and then he would build the hut, or skin the animals that he had hunted at night, and cook them. They didn't speak for a long time. The father only approached him to feed him. But he thought only of the voices of the gods, who had not yet returned.

And if it was them, he wondered, if the pain was the distorted voice of the gods.

They, perhaps, had suffered the same defeat with him, and could not speak except in that way. He now felt safer. It was no longer just him, but them and him. One leaning on the others, propping themselves up like canes.

-Father, what did you do with what you took from me?

Reynhold stood on the roof of the hut, tying together the branches he had brought from the forest that morning, and looked at him.

-In the fire... -he answered.

The son stood up and leaned on one elbow. He distrusted him, and looked at him with hatred. The other couldn't hold that look for long.

-I rescued a part, put it in a sack and buried it.

-I want you to give it to me, I need to prepare an ointment that will cure me once and for all. I won't be able to get up and walk until it heals.

Reynhold did not ask him what kind of preparation it was, not how he had learned it, he was only sure that his son's voices remained unscathed.

He was there, from now on, to help him. He came down fromOn the roof, he walked to the center of the unfinished hut and dug until he unearthed a leather sack tied with ropes. She returned to where her son was and placed him next to her.

-I need leaves from those leaves that are there, father.-And she pointed to a group of leafy, purple bushes.- Also those vines, and all the partridges you can hunt. I will wait for you until night if necessary, and I will not keep you from your tasks any longer than this day.

His voice was clear and calm. It sounded like a voice without rancor. It was not, however, that of a man, but more similar to the noise of branches breaking in the strong wind. It was precise and exact, without harsh tones or timid murmurs. Irrecoverable after being pronounced.

Reynhold grabbed the spear from him and covered his head with a fur cap as he saw the dark clouds approaching from the north. Looking once more at his son, without saying anything he walked away from him. His footsteps were lost in the thicket, mixed with the guttural calls of the birds, which little by little took on the tone of crying, like the tone with which men cry.

Before nightfall, he was back. The sun shone on his distressed face.

-Have you cried, father?

The man rubbed his eyes to erase the traces of sorrow, and dropped the bag with the partridges. Reynod then examined them one by one, confirming that they were the size he expected.

-Well, father, you have brought the oldest ones, those who were about to die at this time.

Then he checked the leaves and put them in a clay container that he had molded in his absence, and which was already dry. He sat with the pot between his open legs, still for a while as he felt the tear that always appeared when he moved. His father's face could hardly be seen anymore. The moon had just risen and the gloom was getting colder. The other then lay down not far away, with his back to him.

Reynod began to recite a litany that he remembered from when he was a child. While he opened the chest of the partridges, he put them in the vessel and sang. The blood and bones crushed with the mortar formed a mass that took a while to satisfy him. The noise of the bones was also like his voice, exact. The owls were quiet that night, and the crickets were dead. There weren't even bats flying from tree to tree. The moon was still slow to rise. Reynod's song and the sounds of his mortar were the cloak that dimmed the brightness and stridency of the land.

The herbs softened the consistency of the preparation, which smelled fresh and strong. The aroma was not only strange, but seemed to awaken his other senses, bringing him images of wounds and mutilated bodies healing. He opened the leather bag, and the firmness he had had until then in his task disappeared. He was surprised to see himself trembling. He untied the knots. The broken leather opened on its own, revealing the mass of soft, dry tissues, without a defined shape. He picked it up and dropped it into the jar. When his hands were free, he stopped shaking. He lit the fire, and kept it up all night warming the fountain, stirring and singing until his lips fell asleep. But his hands never got tired because they remembered what they had touched.

At dawn, he continued stirring, and smoke with the smell of meat came out of the pot. Nothing more than the simple aroma of cooked partridges. The father stood up and sniffed the air without getting closer. The flames had gone out by noon, and the liquid was now a cold ointment, brownish in color and with the right consistency to be spread on sores. He then dumped it into a small leather sack that he had asked his father to sew.

Reynod undressed. Some blood stains dirty the skins of the cot, like every day. Reynhold watched him do it, sitting far away, with his hands above his head, apparently serene, but hitting himself with his fists from time to time.

The son began to spread the ointment on his open scar. He didn't scream, but he wrinkled his face in pain when he touched himself. The father covered his face, then looked back and cried. Reynod's lips were also bleeding. The dog fled from the hut and hid among the trees, always barking.

Reynod wiped away the sweat and covered his body with ointment again. The burning became unbearable, but then, slowly and peacefully, it subsided as fatigue led him to sleep.

It was mid-afternoon, clouds covered the sky with threats of a storm. The father approached him to arrange some blankets to keep him warm. Until it got dark, he dedicated himself to finishing covering the roof with branches. Then he sat next to his son, watching over his rest until the next morning.

The father's head was resting on his hand when he woke up. He looked at the sky through the cracks in the ceiling. The clouds seemed frozen. He gently moved his head away and threw off the covers. He saw no blood stains. He was able to move, turn and stand without pain. He ran naked towards the river. The dog followed him, wagging his tail and jumping.

The sun blinded him and he covered his eyes until he got used to it. His body was gangly, tall, his back overcome by weakness, thin legs, numb fingers, long hair. Seeing himself in the reflection of the water, he imagined a larva emerging from his cocoon. He looked at the polluted waters of the

river, wondering if he would dare drink from it. The dog was also waiting for his decision. He made a quick gesture of indifference, and forming a basin with his hands, he drank.

A murmur grew in his ears, in torrents and waterfalls, roars that became voices. The gods were gliding over the river and looking at him, and he could see where they were going. A place still far away, beyond the mountains, where the reflection of the water and the smell of meat rose like breaths from the earth.

He knew that the gods had regained their dominion. He had relieved them and they rewarded him by removing the silence that overwhelmed him.

"I am an instrument," he said out loud, for himself and for the river that would carry those words, for the birds that pecked in the sand, for the dog sitting next to him, with ears pricked and eyes attentive. .

His father had woken up and was approaching him with a blanket.

-It's cold for you to be naked, son.

-It doesn't matter, father.- And he rejected him, without letting him get any closer.-I'm cured.- He paused, thinking.- I cured myself.

He brought his hands to his chest, clasped them together, and pointed his thumbs at the center of his body. His hair was dripping with water on the shore, his clean face showed his eyes free from the painful gloom of those times.

Reynhold discovered again the look that he hated, the one he had seen the day his wife died. He covered his eyes and knelt in front of his son.

-Do not look at me like that! What are those eyes that have a voice, they seem to be bigger than your body, they stretch across the sky!

-I'm not doing anything, father. You see, my hands are still.

And the old man looked, without thinking about the fear that he had confessed a while before. His son's hands were now next to his face, surrounding him without touching him, and in his palms were eyes that were blinking. Reynhold began to shout. The dog fled again, a flock flew to the other side of the river. Then, escaping from those hands that were watching him, the man also ran to hide in the forest.

There was a flapping of wings, breaking branches, and a howl extending into the distance. Then everything sank into an abrupt, rigid silence.

Reynod never saw his father again.

Later, he left the hut and went up the river to the east.

One day he sat on a rock to blow the horn he had built, covered with the feathers of a grouse. It would not be difficult for him to find sick people after the plague desolated the region and left those who were alive prostrate.

-What is your name? - asked an old woman, the first person who approached him after having made music for almost a whole day. -Your name must be as beautiful as this song.

"My voice comes from the gods," he said. "My hands are their instrument." Those who touch me heal and live a long time.

In that clearing between the trees, those who had gathered around them murmured, speaking to each other in amazement. The figure of Reynod, as serene as the rock on which he sat under the afternoon sun, among the dust and the seeds of the flowers floating next to his fingers on the cornet, resembled a god recently descended from heaven. . The coat covered only one shoulder, and he showed his hairless chest. The cap was the soft, simple fur of a dog.

The old woman brought her sick man to her, with sores on her face.

-Cure him, if you can.

Reynod took the ointment from the bag tied to his right arm, and rubbed it over his wounds. The man felt the cold contact of the preparation, and relief transformed his expression. He prostrated himself in front of Reynod to kiss his feet. The woman looked at him with fear, but when she saw that the sores were disappearing, and that when her husband touched them he no longer screamed, she hugged him and together they worshiped him. Those who had seen this approached, asking what this wonderful ointment was.

"Water from the plague river," Reynod answered.

The woman stopped smiling, while the rest looked at him blankly. But how to understand the designs of the gods, how to follow the understanding of what he cured with the same weapons that had made them sick.

Then others appeared, who had remained hidden among the trees, listening, waiting for what was going to happen with those promises of blessedness. What they did not understand fascinated and overwhelmed them like a storm or a flood. As incomprehensible and natural as they were was the mystery of that young man who healed and played the instrument of the heavens.

Reynod cHe treated each of those who approached, and they brought more sick people, and they had to take them to their town on the banks of a narrow river. News that the healer had finally arrived spread throughout the region. Some said that he came from the western territories, that they had

belonged to the race that bred the Perceptives and that many generations before he had taken their lands and killed their people. But others claimed that the great man had been born from the bowels of the gods, from the waters of the sky that fall from the mountains and create rivers.

They built him a hut, supplied him with food.

He met a young man named Zor, whose family was one of the most respected in the town.

"I have no parents except those in heaven," he had told them, and they accepted it. They were the only ones who treated him like one of them, without special gifts or talents. He ate with the family, sometimes accompanied them hunting, and talked with Zor about what they had both seen of the world, discovering in each other the sagacity absent in the rest.

His cures continued, and people thought that prosperity had come from the hand of the gods. They began to pay him tributes that he had not asked for. They took him to witness their rites, and when he saw the festivals where only disorder and laughter ruled, who worshiped beasts of the forest with the same respect as him, erecting gods as easily as they knocked them down, he felt that they offended the creators. .

He then stood on the roof of a cabin and shouted:

-The Gods put them to the test! Are they going to lose their favors? Are you willing to go through the miseries of the plague again? If you miss the opportunity to redeem yourselves, thousands of plagues will fall upon you.

Everyone looked down. The great man was right, they told themselves. As soon as anyone had healed them, they seemed to have forgotten the dead they threw into the river during those last winters.

Reynod softened his gestures and opened his arms like a father welcoming his repentant children. He organized community prayers and lamb sacrifices to cleanse the souls of those who died. Newborns were taken from their mothers so that Reynod could purge evil spirits from him. They said that he spoke in their ears, blowing the breath of the gods, and that the children exhaled cries of hoarse voices with the smell of rot. Then he himself returned them to his mother, who kissed his hands giving thanks to the creators.

But one day he told them:

-This land is poor, we must migrate to more prosperous ones.- He pointed towards the east, in the direction of some mountains that rose among the mists.- That's where we will go, where the gods await us at the foot of the mountains.

And the worn, sullen peaks of the Lost Mountains were free for a moment from the clouds that covered them, and shone under the sun that illuminated the green of their forests.

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The one waiting in the corner stretched out a hand.

He could barely be seen like an opaque spot in the darkness. His greenish skin, dotted with moles, wrinkles on his deformed knuckles, his thin, dirty fingers.

His thumbnail was missing the white crescent.

The shaking of his hand caught Reynod's attention. If he continued to show fragments of the body from the dark corner, he thought, the other would get closer, until he would touch him, and that was what he couldn't bear. Because he sensed that nothing that had happened to him before was as terrible as that, and to see the smile that he never had.

When the incense was weakening, when everyone was asleep except him. When the fire was nothing more than fathoms, the silence would be strong enough to make the other come out of his hiding place.

He thought about the ointment, that perhaps he would be saved again, but it was too late to tell his son where he had kept it. Britan was next to him, his eyes half-closed and his mind immersed in a fragile sleep.

"How are you, father?" He heard him ask him when he woke up.

Reynod's mouth was dry, cold air ran down his throat and he coughed. His son placed him on his side to clean him.

He thought of the gods, who had fallen silent again. Pain took his place. The pain was not going to leave him anymore, there was no time. He didn't feel hot or dizzy like before his son tried to cure him, but he did feel an emptiness.

You have healed me, I would have told Britan, but you have also pushed me one step towards Them. He was going to caress his son's cheek, but he couldn't. He realized that even his breathing was so weak that he couldn't even notice the movement of his chest. His vision was slowly blurring. A color similar to that of the lake occupied the entire space in front of him.

The lake in which he had found the home of the gods.

Although he was far away, he saw it clearly. The calm waters, the waves so stealthy, that they could be said to be covered in sand. under the gray sky with its perennial drizzle of liquid earth.

Many faces peeked out of the waters, with open eyes and wet hair stuck to their ears. But she couldn't see them below the neck. Some began to appear further away or closer, quickly, without realizing when they had emerged.

You were the faces of their voices.

They matched them with ruthless exactness, the same physiognomies she had imagined as he listened to them throughout his life.

He was not on the beach, but his feet moved toward the shore. He was no longer looking ahead, only at his footsteps in the mud. He saw another face when he touched the water, formed with the drops that gathered together, until the face was drawn at his feet.

But he no longer wanted to see and covered his eyes.

No, mother, don't wait for me, don't come looking for me. Do not take the place of the gods who saved my life. Water is not your place. Your dark face belongs to the earth, mother. It does not have the softness of water, nor can it unite like it. Your body is dry land, impossible to unify, forever cracked.

I must not see you! Don't avoid my meeting with the Creators, don't punish me like that. I will give you my body, mother, if you claim it, but do not take eternity from me.

His face did not disappear.

Reynod shook the water with his feet, but it formed again, clear and expressionless, serene and silent. Just another face in the lake, not even more important than the rest, but it was the only one he had really known in life.

He sensed the storm many days before; his father had not yet announced the day of the initiation. But upon hearing the first thunder, the wind hitting the branches with anger, the lightning that illuminated the impurity of the forest that night, he knew that something had broken inside him. The voices had suddenly died away, and so much silence increased the omens of thunder. The gods did not speak, and he was helpless in the midst of life.

After having hunted the prey and carrying it on his shoulders, ignoring his father's cries, distant, naive like the moans of partridges in their nests, he knew that at some point, something he still did not know was going to

deflect him like a fallen log in the road, and forcing him to take a course where in reality there were no roads.

"Let me help you!" his father told him.

But he wouldn't allow it. Two prey was too much to carry on his shoulders, and yet he was doing it. He wasn't going to turn around either, he didn't know what his hands would do when he saw his father's look. As long as he kept his eyes forward and his hands holding the deer's legs, he was sure to control himself.

He saw the hut illuminated by flashes of lightning, cut by the shadows of the trees. Later he discovered the fire in which his mother cooked the food with which she awaited them. He dropped the holds at the entrance, and she ran to hug him.

"You're a man now!" She told him, while he surrounded her with his arms, linking her hands on her mother's back. She had rested her head on her chest, and she was crying.

-Mother…

She looked up. A flash of lightning illuminated her, but what was in her eyes was not only the usual color, but the multiple faces of the gods.

That night he saw the face of time in the woman's eyes.

The small black dots in her eyes were two large excavations where thousands of shapes and faces lived. Countless, arranged in rows, then changing, metamorphosing their physiognomies. The outlines of her faces overlapped.

They also talked.

Her voices were the ones he had always heard, but they were confused with each other. The shapes did not match the voices. The gods were still being created, it was the body of his mother who generated them.

And he had to give birth to them.

Then he squeezed her tighter, and she abandoned herself to him, happy and rewarded. The smell of her warm hair, warm from the proximity of the fire, entranced him. She trembled, and her tears wet the chest of her son. She pressed a little harder, closing her arms as if there was nothing between them.

She was panting.

"No..." she heard her say, with her lips pressed against him, while she tried to separate herself from her, shaking her arms, which were losing strength. Her hands hit him for a few moments, but soon they gave way, limp like leaves defeated by the summer heat.

The night moaned with its cry of splinters of water over the earth, over the forests and the lost men who must have been hunting, even at those hours of the night, especially at those hours of darkness. The earth was getting heavier with the water, as much as his mother's body was slipping from her arms.

Then, nothing. He held her without dropping her. And nothing. Not a sigh that confirmed the transfer of the gods, of those faces with her voices. The eyelids remained open. The blackheads arehad widened, until finally stopping. The entrance to the gods' basins remained open, but it was nothing more than an empty entrance.

He felt his father's hands hitting him, but he resisted, his thoughts making him indifferent.

He could not explain why he had not recovered the divine voices.

His mother's body was face down, her arms stretched toward the fire and the pot she had been stirring until they arrived, broken next to her. The smell of the food gave the hut a desolate air of everyday life already lost forever. He wiped his face and spat out the teeth that his father's blows had knocked out.

But she couldn't stop looking at her body.

She still had the same candid expression as always, only her complexion was a little more purple. She was dead, and the gods insisted on not abandoning her.

She covered her face with her hands.

Understand think deny think I deny it I must say it I do not deny it yes the dead the gods the voices in their bodies voices without faces bodies that lie apart the gods thoughts that hurt I will deny everything I will deceive the gods the world the river that changes I will tell it again and again I will tell the same story again so many times that I will end up believing them I keep listening everyone will have to bear my pain I will build pillars to support me I will erase my mind I'm already doing it I don't remember there are things I forget my face after eight winters the fire I lit for the first time Once the dog that bit me licked the wound the first hunt hitting me I will forget it until I erase every point on my mother's face every point that her eyes formed right now I will sink my head in the mud and deny everything I will deny that there are other gods who do not be of mud I will deny that there are more gods than this dust and the worms born from the bodies of the dead

As they came down from the mountains, they stopped to look at the bottom of the cracks between the rocks. But they did not dare to go through those straits, even though they could have avoided a long way. Tahia refused to go through them.

"No," she said simply, her forehead and face melting into cold anger.

"Why?" Zaid asked.

She didn't even look at him. She took off her hat and her curly hair fell over her neck and the furs that sheltered her.

"I just know that we shouldn't go there," she told him abruptly.

Zaid had never heard such intonation of anger in her voice before. On the way back to the lands of the Droinne, she had changed. Maybe it was exhaustion, lack of food, or cold. The humidity rising from the river had begun to blush her skin.

Zaid looked at the green mass of the forests that grew as they approached, the same ones he had run through as a child, and the memories came with intense ardor, as if a worm moved in his veins every time he thought of them. those lands. He trusted Tahia, because something in his wife had led him down the right paths through so many rivers and fields. But he was confused, and perhaps he was also disturbed by his own heart when he thought of his parents and his brother.

Tahia rested her hands on Zaid's cheeks.

"It's dark, they are roads that have no bottom," she said, referring again to the hollows.

-But…

-No! In here... -and she pointed to her own chest, although her expression meant her whole body-…it's too dark. I need light to guide me.

Tahia's body seemed to him to be a world of screams and pain that were silenced when he fixed his eyes on the blue sky that covered and surrounded the mountains. Beyond where they had stopped, a thick green mottled with gray shadows and florid reds stretched to the tributaries of the great river. Tahia this time held onto her right arm, abandoning herself. They continued walking, while her sad smile never ceased to touch him.

The load of salted meat wrapped on her back was less heavy after so many days. Among the trees, they heard the flow of streams and the screeching of some birds. The sun was high, and the sound of the animals told them about feeding time. But they weren't hungry. A resentment had been born in Zaid that contracted his muscles and made him sweat. Tahia

continued to look closely at every detail of the place. His eyes had never had such attention and curiosity. From time to time, she broke away from him to move forward toward the clearings, from where she could see the entire length of the valley. They sometimes slipped in the mud, and laughed like children. Tahia offered him her mouth at those moments, and he felta vague taste on his lips, bitter but not unpleasant. A flavor whose peculiarity was the shape, the size of something to be filled by another something that could not be defined.

A hole, a huge fountain that doesn't even contain air. She drowns.

They had almost reached the foot of the last mountain before the valley. The sun gilded their bodies with a pristine reflection, but soon black and malformed clouds began to cover the sky. They sat down to rest and cooked the meat on the fire. Zaid immersed himself in the river, while she smiled at him from the shore. He realized that Tahia's thoughts were directed elsewhere, because her face was a mask. Thinking about her also attracted him to the idea of emptiness. Looking at the water, he noticed that the gentle waves were also masks beneath which was nothingness. Even the pain disappeared in those waters, which she had collected to heat the fire. So it was also when they lay together in bed. He felt healed of the pain, and her memories came to him as images to which her skin was insensitive. As long as she was with him, the temperance of nothingness would protect him from the earth.

They spent the afternoon lying on the shore next to the fathoms, exhausted like the evening sun. They heard thunder from the southeast, above the beech forests in the Lost Mountains.

On his back, with one arm under his sleeping wife's head, Zaid looked east toward the mountains rising again beyond the channel the Droinne had carved to make its way to the sea. The shadows of the clouds cast an opaque halo over things. The trees were only visible when the wind moved them, and the river sparkled with lightning. The birds rushed by to take shelter. Clouds of dust rose with the gusts of cold, humid air. Tahia shivered and clung tighter to her arm.

"Let's take shelter," he said.

She nodded, without opening her eyes, but fell asleep again. He then lifted her in his arms and walked until he took shelter under the trees. The rain formed wells in the earth, overcoming the branches that looked like bridges and channels through which the rain walked to fall into large puddles. The smell of wet earth, so clear and familiar, became the only thing recognizable in the middle of the night.

The next day, it rained more lightly. They continued the path through the fog. Then the drizzle turned into torrents, and fallen and swept branches

interrupted the path. Throughout the day they could not see further than the length of her arms, only the greenish mass of the mountains still far away. They were afraid of stepping on slippery paths that looked like rocks and were nothing more than mud, and of snakes in puddles. In the middle of the afternoon they arrived at a cabin. The channel had overflowed, but the current hit the walls of that shelter with respect.

Through the windows, they saw a group of women around a fire. They turned around when they still hadn't knocked on the door. It was not possible, he told himself, that they could hear his steps above the noise of the current and the rain. An old woman got up and went to the door. Her face was crossed with deep furrows like those made by rain on the ground. A face full of pits where the shadow of distrust prevailed.

-We want to protect ourselves- Zaid asked.- My wife feels sick.

The old woman looked at him carefully, without responding or letting them enter. Only after a while, she stepped aside. She was not tall or strong, but Zaid did not dare to force that look as old as the forest that housed them.

They helped Tahia undress, covered her with a dry blanket, and made her sit by the fire. Zaid began to take off his wet clothes, but they looked at him sullenly with those dry, small eyes between the wrinkles. Tahia made a gesture that he understood, so she had to give in. The women understood each other with a complicity that he could never penetrate. He left angrily, knocking over the milk jug next to the entrance and hurting his foot. The smell of milk spread, and made more evident that vague something that united them and separated them from him. Under the eaves, he took off his clothes and dressed in a colorful robe that the old woman had given him.

"She was my husband's," she told him, but Zaid received her in disbelief, thinking that she must have been stolen. She was woven with wool from pure, well-fed goats. He could feel it in the warmth of the fabric on her body, erasing the chills and submerging him in the warmth of rubbed hands.

When she returned, Tahia had her hair almost dry, and she was smiling at him. The old women only shook their heads in agreement, the only thing her expressionless eyes seemed capable of offering. What could so many women be doing there alone, he wondered, but he soon let sleep overcome him and lay down next to Tahia, resting his headza on his thighs. She caressed him and curled his hair between her fingers, then kissed his beard and ears. He closed his eyes. He didn't know how long he was asleep.

When he woke up, the rain continued and the fire was still strong. But Tahia and the women were not there. Above the sound of the rain came a chant-like murmur. He stand up. His legs hurt and the wound on his heel made him stagger. He walked through the hut, searching even in the corners where the light did not reach. No one, however, was there now. The sound continued, clearer, but it seemed to come from the walls.

-Tahia!

“Nothing more than that song,” he responded. The cracks between the boards let in the smell of rain and lightning. The sound must have been coming from somewhere inside the hut. He stepped on the floorboards, one of the moisture-curved edges swaying. He kicked it with his good foot and managed to dislodge it. Then the women's chant became clearer and louder.

He went down a stone staircase. A liquid was slipping from the walls that was not water, but an oil that made the walls shine. At the end of the stairs there was a wide, dark vault filled with the smell of rotting meat. Then he felt the rock to refute the absurdity of an idea that had suddenly occurred to him. He sniffed his hand stained with the liquid. The light could confuse him, but not the scent of blood. He wiped himself on his tunic and tried to see in the dim light coming from the bottom. As he approached, he saw the women walking around a body lying on a board. But he didn't see Tahia. He called out to her and heard her own voice repeated by the echo.

The old woman who had received them turned her head, as if she were suddenly responding to the call he had made to Tahia. He found it funny that the old woman with the thin face and gray hair was trying, perhaps, to compare herself with the beauty of his wife. She motioned for him to come closer. Zaid reached her side and saw the one lying on the boards. The body was shrouded in a tunic similar to his own, but two old women, holding a fountain from which the smell of fermentation emanated while they bowed with a murmur between their lips, prevented him from getting any closer. The other said something he didn't understand and they let him pass.

For the first time he could clearly see the figure of the man, perhaps the husband of the elderly woman. He distinguished the colors of the fabric better.

It was identical to the one he was wearing.

And his face also resembled his own face.

The hands on his chest were dirty with blood, like hers.

He didn't want to look up at the old women, just flee from there, but one of the dead man's hands grabbed him by the cloth, and he heard him say:

-Your death will be announced three times.

The dead man's eyes had not opened. His lips closed again with a sheen of saliva falling from his mouth.

Zaid didn't remember what he had done next. He woke up at dusk, lying again on Tahia's thighs, with the sun warming his cheeks, his fathoms extinguished, and her body wrapped in sweat.

"You were sick," she said. "You shivered all night, but I rubbed your back so you wouldn't get cold."

He looked at her as if she didn't understand. He got up and walked around the cabin. There were the remains of the milk jug and the fabrics abandoned on the floor. He hit the wood on the floor, but no amount of effort was enough to lift it.

-What are you looking for?

-Cave! Where are the women?

-They left at dawn, they were taking shelter from the rain like us.

-But the husband's funeral...!-He said, and when he heard himself speak he had the sensation of being telling a dream.

She approached to console him, but Zaid rejected her. He felt like killing her again, but he cried and hugged Tahia's legs.

-I'm going to die! Didn't you say you were going to protect me?

-I take you by the hand, I am at your side, but what do you expect to find being surrounded by darkness.

Tahia's hands played with her soul as with a handful of dirt, he knew it. And he was afraid of the palms that caressed him.

For three days they did not speak. They traveled along steep paths that the storm turned into dangerous gorges, rocks and clumps of mud, old trees that fell apart due to the rain. They found two hunters who said they had left the town of Reynod. The men looked sick.

"Where have you seen them?" they asked them.

-We left them in the cove after the third bend of the Droinne. Where the flooded area begins.

-Why do you leave the town?

They looked at each other, hesitating.

-Who asks?

-I am Tol's firstborn.

Then they both smiled and hugged each other, their weak figures seemed to disarm with the joy they showed.

-You have finally arrived, grandson of Zor! We have waited a long time. The Witcher has not dragged the plague, but no one dares to contradict

him. We join the rebels, who are fighting. But we... - They opened their clothes and showed the sores on their bodies. - We are sick because we have drunk the water from the lake.

In her eyes and in his hands you could see the longing to hug Zaid, but the rain ran down their faces, through their wet hair and the plague stains, which bled.

"It's the curse that repeats itself, but this time it lasts too long," they said.

He looked at Tahia, and then they did too. Seeing the woman's eyes, they stopped smiling. Then they left without saying goodbye, almost fleeing and turning around from time to time as they got lost in the thick of the forest.

They continued walking until the cove from which a greenish plain emerged under the blanket of fog, the same one that he had crossed on his trip to the west. But it looked different, flat and covered in a darker green, like a large surface of smelly mold over the valley. They made their way through the brush to a ravine that ended to the north, but beyond that there was only barren land made muddy by the rain. And the strange thing was that from there a cloud of dust rose that rotated suspended in the air. The sky was dark, lit by lightning from the mountains to the west.

And further north, a large lake.

Zaid recognized him and remembered Draiken, the rain that had killed him, so similar to this one. The overflow of the Droinne had subsided, but the stagnant waters persisted, isolated from their source by a spit of land threatened with flooding once again. He told Tahia to look over there. It was the first time he had spoken to her in days.

-That's the place.

She nodded, without showing curiosity, as if she had known him before. She seemed distant and proud. The further they went, the more different it seemed. She was only a little fatter, but she continued to be beautiful as always, firm and upright, her skin taut with that purple color that resembled ripe fruits about to open their pulp.

The cloud of dust revealed bright points like open eyes on the fabric of that aerial land of imprecise movements and colors. They went down and around the rocks and trees. The cloud and dust became less dense, then they saw the figures of hundreds of men scattered beyond what they could see.

-They fight! "They are from my people!" Zaid shouted, with his arm raised. Sweat from the rain fell on his forehead. But behind the warring men, he saw the surface of the lake even darker, even though the fog had

almost disappeared. The waters did not even reflect the lightning. He could only see the waves with their slow movement of thick waters. Zaid looked at his wife.

She was attentively contemplating the waters, and she began the descent, without expecting it. He followed her, and as they went down, they heard the war cries, the clash of spears, and the whirring of arrows flying like birds over the men and the field. The width of the river separated them from the battle, and they sat down to watch.

Zaid thought he recognized some faces, but he was more familiar with the way the men moved. The gestures were not lost over time, they became stronger, obstinate in gaining the body until the names and faces merged into a single movement or gesture that represented them. Those who had not changed were mainly the older ones. The white heads could be seen among the clumps of blood and dried mud. He recognized the old spear craftsman at the side of the field, secluded, protected by young men.

Tahia looked further away.

"Let's walk there," she said, and showed him the bend in the river from which the lake had flowed.

The war cries continued, muffled by the sound of rain on the stream. The lake was taking shape as they approached, taking shape in the landscape with an austere, although not serene, immobility. Something was sticking out of the water at times, very quickly, and it was impossible to recognize what it was. Zaid was attracted, and he abandoned his attention from the battle behind him. He stood up on some rocks and strained his eyes to see the cause of those movements, of the almost stony waves that were born and sank again.

Tahia ignored his shocked words. Her eyes were two white lunar spheres in the middle of the gray landscape, on a face that increasingly resembled the empty face of the old woman in her hut.

Hands rose from the waves with open fingers, long, broken nails, and skin stained by algae. Heads emerged with hard hair, rigid as thorns, others bald and covered with insects. Sometimes, some skulls showed empty sockets, floating adrift in that lake of slow currents.

A strongly sweet and cloying smell came from there. He recognized that aroma as the mud thatA night of hunting permeates the skin. A perfume of something hidden under the disturbed earth. Earth and water in a great cycle that perhaps had not yet ended, but that was going to repeat itself countless times later, even though he and his people were no longer in the world.

Tahia walked towards the shore. She dipped her feet and paused for a moment. One hand grabbed her leg, the fingers covered in black hair, veins

and tense tendons, squeezed Tahia's foot. She looked. Her hand suddenly released her with calm compliance, and she submerged again. She continued to advance, until half of her body was submerged. Around her, her hands, the heads with open mouths that still seemed to be drowning, babbled wordless screams. She extended her arms towards all of them as if she wanted to console them, encompassing with the arc of her arms the sadness and pain stirred in the black waters.

Zaid heard the men approaching across the rocky grooves to the east of the lagoon. They carried weapons whose shine disappeared in the dust they raised. In front of them, there was another group waiting for them with their spears raised, and from their clothes he knew that they were Reynod's men. The faithful were trapped between the lake and the mountains.

Tahia had also heard the thunder of footsteps. The sound of weapons echoed through the waters, and the skulls swayed. She looked at Zaid and murmured something that he never heard, but she did understand the movement of her lips, the movement of the raindrops on Tahia's face, drawing words.

She heard the message through those shapes on her face.

Help I will help you this time Then later it will be your Labor will be your job.

The waters began to rise.

He had been staring at Tahia's lips for a long time. And when he understood the message, his wife's arms were already rising, and with them the surface of the lake began to form waves without wind or violence. Soft thick waves like walls of trees rising, always rising and forming innumerable liquid columns and whirlpools of water, where the faces of deformed mouths rotated. Hands and legs detached themselves from the walls of water and reentered, spinning without stopping, with the singing of distant voices, hundreds of low and deep cries that followed one another. Bodies sticking out of the water and showing the marks of the plague. The faces were bones and they were flesh, and the worms came loose with the force of the waves. The flesh screamed between the black teeth.

Zaid could not stand and knelt with his gaze towards the lake of heaven, towards that sky overcome by the elements of the earth, from where the heads of the dead looked, and the hands opened and closed continually.

The warriors had stopped and were beginning to retreat towards the mountains, without stopping to contemplate the cloud of suspended water, as if the bones were about to fall on all of them. They were men who thought they had seen everything, except that.

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Father has died.

I would like to sleep for three days, but the wounded continue to arrive despite the truce, for which no one knows how long it will last. The silence hurts. You hear it in the screams. Brief peace always hurts. But I have no desire to enter the field under the rain of arrows.

Father is dead, and my brother will take his place. Without magic, only physical strength. When he looks at me, I know he's reproaching me for not fighting them. I guess my homework is nothing more than an excuse in his eyes.

I should leave the dead with the dead, and go out with my spear and my bow. It's not cowardice that prevents me from doing it, it's the feeling of wasting time in struggles that will lead me nowhere. The idea of killing or being injured for no purpose.

If the order of the sky and things, the shape of the world and its days, the moon and its figures in the ice, the sun, the sweat of summer, if I have seen all this in the bodies of men, in the involuntary habit of the viscera, how can I give them less value than those words grouped under the name of honor, a moment of something well done and then destroyed by thought. Nothing lasts, and we change, the mind sheds its clothes faster than the waters of a waterfall. But the body remains innocent despite everything, it works, always, and rarely speaks or complains. The life of the body is full and great like the sun. Blood is the water that could quench the sun itself. The beauty of the hand that covers the moon, and compresses it in her palm. The soft lines of a foot, the throbbing of the chest. The bones, trees of the body.

Rest. Sleep. Close the eyes.

Father has died.

He washed his hands and face. He returned to Reynod's bedside to close his eyelids. He covered him with a blanket. He was alone in the middle of the night, and even the guards had fallen asleep. He knew he had something left to do. The fire had almost been extinguished, only the reflection persisted. or from the water accumulated in the vessels.

She went to the entrance and looked at the wounded, who were finally resting. In the distance, the imminent dawn was the color of pustules. Some spears rose from the battlefield, swaying in the wind. She walked towards the sick hut. His assistants were no longer working. Such stillness was not normal. Why he, who also deserved rest, was still awake. He took off his

clothes and lay down, his head on the blood-stained fabrics, his legs on the wetness of urine. His eyes closed as he looked at the amputated legs and arms forming a high mound against the wall, and whose shadow reached him. But he came out of the slight sleep abruptly when he felt the cold contact of the skin of his girlfriend's sister.

"Don't be scared," she said, running a cold hand over Britan's cheek.

He was shivering from the cold that the rain had brought that night, and he ended up waking up completely. Her hands were made of water, her fingers caressed like frozen drops.

"I saw you so still, next to the dead." She took Britan's hands and rested them on one of his breasts.

He felt his fiancée's body vibrate, begging for something beyond the limit of custom. He had until then refused to marry her, because he knew that she would be sacrificed as soon as he gave him her child. This had happened with Sorkus's wives. The difference was that his brother had not loved the women with whom he had children. He had even tried to forget that wish with the arrival of the war. But his head continued to feed the body's anxiety, and he no longer found peace. She looked at the dead around her. Then he pulled her towards him and began kissing her neck, brushing his nose against the skin of her shoulders. He took one of her girlfriend's hands, squeezed it tightly, and led it to her sex. She was startled, without saying anything.

Britan and his mind were lost in a field as vast as the woman's skin. A field of cloudy sky but without rain, without sadness, just kindly gray. And in the middle of the great plain, a small bonfire. Her skin grew warmer as he caressed her. He laid her on the blankets and could no longer stop the desire that smelled of blood, and the time spent cutting legs and closing wounds became an impulse with the shape of the body molded between her hands. The woman's bones brittle under the weight of her muscles. Then the desperate cry of both of them, as if she had also been waiting for him since the time they saw each other in the cabin where the women were cooking. The fire cooking the meat that the men would eat. It was he who entered the warm meat hut in which she was now sheltering him. Then he moved away from her side and put his hands on her face. He bit his lips as he looked at the dead pieces next to her, and cried silently for a long time.

"When are we leaving?" she asked, while she brushed his cheek with the tips of her fingers.

-I must stay for the funeral.

She answered nothing, but she understood. When she left, Britan left the hut.

"It's not raining anymore," the guard told him, who had perhaps seen and heard everything.

-It's true.

They looked at the moon in the clear sky. Soon the wounded would wake up.

"Let my assistants go to my father's cabin," he ordered, and he walked towards there. He saw movements and shadows, but inside he saw nothing but the body. The bonfire swayed with the gusts of the morning wind between the boards. The body was uncovered from the blanket with which she had left it covered, with one arm drooping extended towards the shadowed corner. He reached out and tried to bend it, but it was stiff. He had to prepare it, cover it and make it up in the best way he could so as not to disturb the susceptibility of the people. It wasn't that he cared, but that the priests would come soon and consider it a bad omen. Impatient for his helpers to arrive before the sun woke up the elders, he decided to undress his father to buy time. He began to remove the blankets that had absorbed the discharge from the wounds, and threw them into the fire. A nauseating aroma spread, and the guards looked out.

"Get out!" he shouted. Then he lifted the body, and rested the old man's back on his right arm. His face moved closer to Reynod's, brushing cheek and nose with long, thin features. Never, that he could remember, had he been so close to his father. But never again from today would he feel her spicy breath every night at the end of the rites, with his hard and severe gesture. Today, however, the old man looked so calm and defenseless that he no longer seemed like Reynod the Witcher, but rather one of the many old men that he had once had to cure.

He brought his cheek a little closer to the dead man's face. His skin touched. His arms trembled as he hugged him. He barely noticed, took a deep breath and continued. or your homework. She removed the tunic and furs. She wasn't surprised to see the smooth surface of the skin; she knew that Reynod had always lacked thick hair. Then she dedicated herself to cleaning his back, which was still draining blood and stench.

She cut the cloth that covered the legs and lower body. She saw the wounds from the battle and the ones he had made trying to heal him. He poured water and washed away the scars and blood. When he got to sex, he stopped. He put one arm over her hips, and the rest of his body with the other. His legs opened, and he saw again the large scar he had discovered the night before. He decided to have no qualms this time about doing his job, but he would take the necessary precautions.

He looked towards the entrance. The guards remained in their places. He called for the one who had been in the other hut. The sentry entered and Britan placed a hand on his shoulder to accentuate the trust, to make the loyalty more lasting.

-Don't let anyone enter until I order it. For no reason. Not even brother should happen.

The sentry asked what he would say to the helpers who had just arrived.

-Let them return at sunrise, and wait.

The guard came out, heard him talking to the others, and they began to board up the entrance. Britan put fuel on the fire, which had almost been consumed by the dead man's cloths. There was more light now. He checked the body again. The flaccid thighs, tense only where the large scar began, which turned the skin into a thick, smooth and hard pinkish leather, without wrinkles. And in the center, under the sex, he found warped and irregular scars, but nothing else. He knew what it was about. Even as a child he had castrated many animals.

He felt the scars, so soft, they seemed to have been made too long ago for Britan to remember, perhaps longer than he had been alive. But that was impossible.

Father has never left the people. He was never seen sick. He never went a day without someone being in his presence. The trials, the recruitments, the daily prayers, which could not be postponed, required his constant presence.

He brought the torch a little closer. The heat revived the aroma of the crusts. White larvae crawled through the wounds. Britano threw water, rubbing with a hard-haired brush, until Reynod's skin took on the color of his youth. The lost blood made it even paler, and the flames danced on the clean surface, almost pink as a child's. The flames looked like the hands of a woman emerging from the fire to take the man on a journey.

He wiped away every drop that could leave an impure trace between the folds of the face, neck or hands. He cleaned the nails. He trimmed the sparse beard and hair until it was almost skin level.

No hair on his body. A man of his height, his width of shoulders, without hair on his body. Nothing but a layer of blonde hair covering the center of his chest, the beginning of his back.

And only in his sex was his growth and maturity noticeable, which seemed to have stopped before fully developing. He no longer wanted to think when he discovered the path of his ideas. They flowed with gentle ease, that was how he had always reasoned best, how his intelligence had allowed him to learn what he knew about the body and men. Looking, thinking.

But it is not possible. If there is something that is not possible in the world, it is this.

He wanted to remember his father's friends, someone he could ask, but there were none. No one had ever become closely attached to Reynod. No one ever could boast of his confidence.

At least not in my lifetime.

Father was alone. A town surrounded it. He always spoke and led the lives of others.

Reynod's silence continued to isolate him, definitely now. And he, Britan, examining with his eyes and hands, tried to discover other marks that would tell him the story of the old sorcerer, that would relieve him of the weight of emptiness, of the vertigo of the truth to which his reason was leading him.

"Sir!" the guard called across the platform. "The priests demand entry."

-Let them wait for it to come out.

The elders listened, and one spoke:

-Sir, son of Reynod, we understand his regret, but he should have notified us tonight of the death of his father. It is our duty to prepare the body for the funeral rites.

-I know better than you what to do!

-But it is not the custom.-The voice began to lose serenity. -My Lord knows the laws that his father has taught us. There must be witnesses to the process, at least one of the priests must be with you.

A murmur grew on the other side, then the footsteps in the mud receded. One of the guards approached and his severed shadow extended beneath the door.

-They are angry, my Lord. They're going to look for Chief Sorkus.

-I know. He had to hurry, his thoughts had stuck in one that blocked all the others, that grew and threatened to plunge him into a void he had never felt before. The void surrounding the cabin, and he in the middle of that overwhelming mountain with a strange body.

Because he no longer knew whose he was.

He took the bone needles and sheep threads from the bag Reynod kept under his cot. He smelled the aroma that the witcher's hands had left, the ones that he once respected and loved, although they no longer seemed worthy to him. And today he was committing a sacrilege by taking on that task, but he was not going to let anyone else see what he had discovered. The priests, who used to intrigue behind the witcher's back, would begin to sow doubts in the town, and the war with the rebels would not tolerate such things.

He took the rocks kept in the bag. He opened the corpse's mouth and put a stone between the teeth.

"May death not taste like worms," he recited, thinking about the useless effort of that whole process to prevent the bones from turning back into earth. Cover the holes so that the time larvae that weave the days one by one do not penetrate. He sewed the lips that were bleeding when he passed the needle. He wiped his chin and continued. He put some smaller stones in the nostrils.

-May death not have the smell of worms.

He sewed the wings of the nose and slowly pierced the septum. For the eyelids, he chose a finer needle.

-May the face of death not be bigger than the moon.

He then placed a stone in each ear, folded the ears and sewed them together.

-May death have the sound of the music of water.

He turned the body over. He looked for a vessel and poured out some oil, heated it in the embers, and when he was ready, he poured it on the scar of the sex. He placed a stone on it and waited for the oil to cool.

-May death not enter, may death not make you hurt like a woman, may death only caress you...

He reheated the liquid, and covered the rest. His skin was taking on a yellowish hue that no longer shone with the flames, but with the first rays of the sun that warmed the hut. There were movements outside, and some strong blows made the boards shake.

-Brother!- Sorkus called him.- What's wrong?

-I'm finishing shrouding Father.

The voices of the elderly were raised in protest.

-Mister! We will not be present at the funeral if you take away the privilege of shrouding.

-Brother, I must go in!

-No!

-I'm his son, too!- Sorkus sounded furious. -I can tear down the cabin if I want.

Britan saw only the shadows against the sun. The aroma of the oil told the elders that the ritual was ending.

-Sorkus, I have never been disloyal to you. I have healed the men you sent into battle for three days straight, without resting or complaining.

"Then don't provoke me." Sorkus' voice had changed. His shadow made a sign and the other shadows moved away. Then he leaned against the boards.

"I ask you for a little more time," Britan said.

-No! We will lose the support of the priests, and the people trust them, even more so with this war that will take us time to end.

-If I let you in, we will lose war and power. We will no longer have anything to defend ourselves with, or really anything to defend.

-But what's happening?!-Sorkus was no longer trying to calm his anger.

"Trust," Britan asked.

Sorkus stepped back, without saying anything else.

He only raised his right arm, with an order, and the boards creaked under the weight of the men entering.

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Sorkus spoke, and with his hands he drew figures from the past, which soon disappeared in the smoke of the bonfires. The people heard his words of regret and despair. His feet sometimes touched the edge of the platform. They had built the altar during the morning, because the one on the shore of the lake had been destroyed by the fire arrows of the rebels. Reynod's body, behind and to the right of him, was surrounded by the mist of incense that the priests had lit with branches of sacred trees. They looked grumpy, murmuring the disagreement that they needed to demonstrate in some way. They seemed not to hear him, and had even forgotten the song and chant of the funeral. Sorkus noticed the people's gazes directed towards the sound of the priests. It was barely noon on the first day of the rites, and he feared what might happen.

In front of me, the war, the stalking of the rebels, the silence and the truce that I cannot trust. From here I see them, settled on the other side of the lake, waiting.

In front of me, the pain, the confusion that is mixed in the words.

The chaos my brother has placed in my soul.

The doubt grows. It clouds my vision, and I speak without seeing anything other than the objects of fear.

-I, firstborn of the Great Father, will assume command of the people. I have demonstratedI love my loyalty. They will have to show me the same obedience as they showed my father, because we are at war. These three days will be of rest and reflection. We have a duty to unite to win. Therefore, reconciliation is necessary.

He looked at the priests sternly, they lowered their gaze and he spoke again. This time everyone was silent. Greenish incense rose in columns. The rain had stopped, and still narrow spaces opened between the clouds.

-But we are here to talk about the great Reynod. What can I say about my father more than what you already know? His wisdom was evident, he enraptured us with his knowledge of the things of the visible world and the other, the one that belongs to the gods. Because They spoke to him, he was different from the rest of us. How many things he has not told us, we will never know. He only told us what was necessary to live. Sometimes knowing too much can take away the simple life that the gods have given us. We are small like my children. - Sorkus pointed to the two children who were playing molding handfuls of clay. - They ignore it, and they are blessed for that.

I would give half my life to be like them. Only this morning I was still a child.

-We will never again have such a man, because he was not just a man, but the Chosen One. A superior being that benefited us with his presence.- His voice broke. His throat was worn from the cries of battle. The muscles in his neck ached, but no woman was waiting for him in his hut with a hot drink, no one to caress him. He drank water. His gaze met Britan, on the side of the altar. He could have shown her his anger again, like this morning, but he just blinked several times, hiding her eyes from him.

The incense had taken on the color of twilight, the priests were burning branches of a tree with a red trunk. The crackling was beginning to merge with the rhythm of the dance that the men dressed in loose green tunics had started. No one saw them go up to the altar, hidden by the smoke. But now his loose clothing could be clearly seen, moving with the dance, like large leaves torn from the same tree that was burning in the flames.

The priests had their heads covered with a crown of white doves, whose dead eyes shone like gray dots. But even with their faces painted black, they lacked the appropriate figures for the funeral.

They don't dare to rebel, but they do confront me with this humiliation. They choose dishonorable signs to express themselves, their faces messy with the expression of anger. But what will they give to the people in

exchange for their betrayal? His calloused old hands. Their rituals repeated ad nauseam. They will give you nothing but doubts, and the people need certainties like the air they breathe so as not to dissolve like dust in the wind.

I must ingratiate myself with them until the end of the war.

The men made turns in their dance, circles around themselves and around the corpse. A spiral that closed to the rhythm of the drums.

-The rhythm of life recedes, the heart succumbs.-One of the old men finally began to recite the psalmody with his arms raised, surrounded by the other priests.

Sorkus feared an interruption in every move. The elders had calmed down, cold and discreet, and he felt that slight, temporary support, like a relief. However, he was suspicious. The murmurs during the ceremony seemed to have constituted an agreement, a plan.

He looked at his brother, shadowed by grief and so oblivious to the skill and determination he had always shown. It was difficult to see Britan like this, surrounded by guards, with his dazed eyes directed at him, his elbows on his knees, and his fiancée standing behind him. At least he had a woman to comfort him. He looked for his younger brother, but he didn't even see him among the people.

Everyone was praying, following the old priest's litany. The dance continued until the dancers surrounded the body, and joined their hands over the corpse to form a roof to protect it from the sun. The sky was already clear, the puddles of water reflected the luminosity of the sunset. The clouds were moving away towards the lake.

Sorkus turned his back to them and spoke.

-Those who are prepared to receive the offering should come forward.

Three male deer had been slaughtered, and their blood collected in a large fountain. The priests began to pass a vessel from hand to hand, from the source where they collected the blood to the oldest, who gave the offering of meat in exchange. The dancers had come down from the altar, and were hitting the ground with their feet, simulating the thunder of the beginning of time.

"The gods are with us today," said the priest. "Look at the setting sun." The soul of our great Chief has broken through the clouds, and he has conquered them. The gods receive it with joy.

His voice is sincerera. Those words cannot be faked. The old man knew my father as well as he let himself be known. It was a life whose pillars are being laid by the memory of those who treated him. A later armed construction, in the future. It exists today more than yesterday. Today his

life begins. And he must laugh. He is laughing at our insignificant sorrows, at the tangle of uncertainties we have entered with his death.

Father has told us the most tremendous word about him, after dying.

The dance persisted until the day was fading. The bonfires, a circle of stars around the body, continued to illuminate him. When the last man in the town received the sacrificial offering, the priests changed their robes for black ones. They did so in the darkness beyond the campfires, while a murmur of dissent continued to come from them. Sometimes the glow of the moon was reflected on the skin of an arm, a leg, a bald head. Then the attendants brought a large woven cloak which five priests spread out to cover Reynod's body, so that the night dew would not disturb him.

Sorkus did not want to see anyone after the ceremony. He was not sleepy and needed to meditate. He leaned back looking at the white sphere of the moon, deformed and cut between the branches of the shed. That was his heart, he told himself. Divided into many pieces, and each one thinking about how to rejoin the other. Only one fact consoled him, the end of the day. He thought of Britan. She liked talking to him, but she wasn't going to see him that night. He was going to pray, and yet he didn't feel like doing it.

"Sir, a messenger has arrived!" they told him.

He brought in the man, whose face was covered in wounds.

-Sir, they caught us a day and a half ago. We thought we were going to die, but the rebels stopped for no reason. The hordes came down the hills and suddenly stopped. They looked at the sky, and stopped paying attention to us. Then they raised their arms pointing to the sky with cries of horror. We looked everywhere for the reason for his fear, and we saw nothing but the clouds, the usual rain, and a black line over the lake, like a distant flock. Was that important enough to chicken out and stop, we wondered. And we think about a spell that the Grand Warlock, his father, has sent them. He is protecting us from death. Then we started praying. Since yesterday we have supported the barrier that the enemies do not want to open. They have remained still, waiting, with their eyes set on the sky. They seem to be waiting for something from that shadow line.

Sorkus sent for food and water. An idea bothered him as he listened to the messenger. He also had the oldest priest come, the only one he could trust.

-Wise old man, sorry for distracting your sleep, but the crisis does not allow many hours of rest, nor does it respect the health of the elderly. I just learned something that worries me, although happily so.

The old man listened to the story and seemed moved, but Sorkus knew how those old schemers liked to pretend. Placing a hand on Sorkus's shoulder, he said:

-I'm sorry... I'm sorry.-And he shook his head as a sign of regret and regret.-We always knew what your brother discovered. Reynod never said it outright, but we always suspected it. There are things that cannot be hidden. Now his soul is more powerful than we had thought. He has bewitched the rebels, he has subjected them to his now invariable will. He is watching us, and he surely heard the betrayal we plotted against his son. On the third day of the funeral, we would make you drink a preparation to eliminate you, and since your brothers do not want your position, we would take power.

Sorkus was not surprised, that confession satisfied his pride rather than infuriating him. But then he realized how weak the reality in which he had grown up was. There was nothing to hold on to, nothing was certain, and perhaps even the gods were nothing more than games of the mind.

He walked around the old man, thinking about how to let him go without feeling humiliated. The priest seemed sincere, but pretending was as easy as breathing.

What would my father do in my place?

He again doubted who his father was. He was sure of nothing, everyone lied, everyone wore masks and tears of impure water. And the right decision was awaited from him, in an instant whose loss was equivalent to the absolute fall of his world. Of what he had learned, only doubts remained. The only thing that did not change forms were the weapons, the effectiveness of the weapons that never failed.

Looking at him hunched over, agitated with short breaths, interrupted by hot flashes and coughs, he wanted to shake him by the shoulders until he forced him to tell him the truth. Too many times, when he was a child, he had heard the conversations behind his father's back; he had seen the knowing looks between the priests. This was the occasion they must have been waiting for allthat time. If he let the old man walk away unscathed, he would be giving him permission to call him a coward, and that was more dangerous than being killed.

I must see the truth, old man. Open your head to see the sincerity of your words. Is there a rupture, an abyss, between them? A greater contrast than the colors of day and night? I should know, but I only know about wars, about man-to-man fights, about weapons. I know nothing more than what my father taught me to survive. Not about souls and their diversity.

The old man was still sitting, looking towards the entrance. Sorkus couldn't tell if his eyes remained open. Maybe he was asleep, or, once again, he was pretending. The old man's heart was sick, he suffocated

easily, and sometimes he became so pale that the blood did not reach his cold white hands. He heard him cough again and brace himself to keep from falling.

-Old man.

He didn't hear a response. His head had fallen with his chin on his chest, swaying to the rhythm of his labored breathing. Sorkus climbed onto the cot and knelt behind him with a fur blanket in his hands.

What my father would do.

The blanket covered the priest's head. The old man woke up and began to move desperately. His hands shook, tearing strands from the edges. He reached out to touch Sorkus's hands, but he no longer had the strength to hurt them.

What father would do.

The coughs were repeated, the moans tried to become words. His legs barely moved two or three times. Sorkus's arms continued to hold him. He held them firm until he felt the old man's weight fall. He didn't want to see a single twitch or blink, a trembling finger when he pulled back the blanket. As if he had not participated in that transition, as if he had not been the one to do it. And he thought of Reynod, and he looked at his hands and saw how they resembled the witcher's hands.

He removed the blanket and his body fell on his side.

"Guards!" he shouted, while he rested his head on the old man's chest. -Call my brother! His heart has stopped knowing the actions of my father's soul.

The men who entered saw him trying to find life in his body.

The other priests refused to officiate at Reynod's funeral in the morning. Only Britan's insistent certainty that the old priest had died without violence convinced them to continue. But their gazes seemed like hits of rocks every time they focused on Sorkus. He held those looks all day with the severe rictus of someone who knows he is confident.

The dawn had started cold, but the sun was beginning to warm the people gathered to say goodbye to the man who spoke with the gods and had led them through forty winters. And a common expression of disconsolation prevailed on the faces. Not even the illness and hunger they encountered on the shores of the lake had managed to erase the meekness that the prodigious voice and figure of the witcher provoked in them.

The bearers would carry Reynod's body along the path strewn with white seeds and lynx skins. The sorcerer's will had been to be deposited in the lake. It was not the custom, but the man who demanded it was not common either.

That night he had regained trust in his father, and he needed to forget what his brother had told him. He took the messenger as his assistant, and did not let him be separated from him during the rites. From time to time, while he observed the transfer of the priest's body to the altar, he asked the messenger about the phenomenon he had seen in battle, and upon hearing the story once again, he boasted of the favor that his father was doing them.

Some men lit flames around the body. The women threw spices into the fire that would help the soul ascend to heaven. They dedicated almost the entire afternoon to honoring his figure, and the priests made no mistakes in the litanies. Preparations for Reynod's funeral then continued.

Those who had danced the day before dressed in blue fabrics, the color of the water the lake must have once had. They descended from the altar and formed themselves on the sides of the path. The women were located behind and in the free spaces, so that when the witcher's corpse passed, they could cover it with the green leaves of their fountains. The embers from the bonfires were collected with hoes by the slaves and carried to the road. Then they placed them on the seeds and the mud. The skins were moved to one side, and when the warm logs were spread out, they were placed back on top. The smell of burning fat dissolved into the air of the barely ripe afternoon. The sun had the slowly regained strength of a convalescent. There was no wind, but the murmur of the crowd seemed to replace it and move the flames.

Sorkus preceded the line of priests carrying the body. He carried the feathered horn in his right hand. that someone had found among the mud of the battlefield, and the stiletto on the left. He wasn't going to make use of them, for now. The succession was to be finalized at the end of the funeral. A people that had not changed its spiritual leader for so long needed those three days of anguish and meditation before a new era. He began to descend from the altar, stepping on the warm skins. He was barefoot, but he was wearing the garments that his sisters had sewn that night for the ceremony,

they wove, while I killed the old man

Made with strands of reed intertwined, forming drawings of hunters and gods. One of the women who had been excepted from the ancient sacrifice of the virgins, drew on the leaves the forms of the gods according to the stories of Reynod. Sorkus's arms were bare, and the hair on her shoulders and arms swirled and almost matched the figures. On his head he had a crown of grouse feathers. Then they rubbed his skin with oils.

Every step taken on the path swayed the feathers of his crown. He took one step and stopped, another and stopped again. The entourage of priests followed behind, with their heads bowed, their shoulders raised and one arm raised holding the board with the corpse. Only the black shroud and the ashes of the bonfire with which they had covered it could be seen.

The drums sounded weak. Even if they tried, the members of the procession could not achieve a step equal to the previous one, a pause similar to the other, because the beats were irregular on all the drums, and that is how they all walked, at different rhythms. But the apparent delay suddenly began to show harmony. Something was being created in the march, a rhythmic, serpentine music that ascended towards the body and infected it. That is why it seemed to the men who were crying and to the women who were throwing leaves and seeds, that the corpse rose far above them all, and stretched in shadows toward the sky, like an enormous black larva.

The procession arrived at the beach. Sorkus stopped a short distance from the gray foam of the small waves. In one area there were four people at the edge of the water. A young man too thin for his slenderness, as if he had been hungry for a long time and it showed in his elongated figure. The woman next to him was dark-skinned, and she was playing with two naked children. Sorkus thought about his children, who he had left guarded by the guards. But these two looked very similar, despite not being able to distinguish them well from a distance. The adults did not belong to the town. Not only did he not remember them, but his dirty clothes made his wandering evident. Then he looked at the woman carefully, the contours of her body, the curves of her breasts and back, the line of her head silhouetted against the gray clouds, her feet covered with the dead algae of the lake. He must have dove in a while earlier, and now he was pushing the children into the water.

Sorkus reproached himself for being distracted by these strangers. He turned his attention to the ceremony to obey his father's will, despite everything. Leave him in the stinking waters that the old man had chosen as his last resting place. He approached the body and began to blow the horn. He had heard that tune many times, trying hard to learn it when he was a child.

The people followed their movements. Everyone's eyes had lost their sadness. It was a new look, he could feel it in those barely sketched smiles, in the faces of the children raised on their parents' shoulders, in the hands of the women resting on the arms of their men.

The sound began timidly, veiled by the shadow of the evening. Then it grew. A continuous music, without fractures or uncertainties, without hesitations between the paths of the air. A soft tone, bright at times, never too high-pitched, but always beyond the monotony that could lead to oblivion or indifference. He held the cornet to his lips, his fingers vibrating

on the wood. Head held high, shoulders moving with slight sway as the sound required. The women were crying. The men now contemplated him without sorrow or distrust. Many were warriors who only two nights before had fought and been wounded, but they were not tired.

Then he stopped playing. The music stopped so abruptly that it seemed to continue playing under his own power for a while.

"My father's music will go with him," said Sorkus. He placed the bugle on the corpse's chest and tied it with a red leather ribbon.

The priests carried the body again and put it on a raft. They had to wait until twilight for the tide to take her away. Torches were lit along the beach.

When night fell, the body could barely be seen through the fog. The coast seemed like a barrier of stars marking the limit of the world of the living with the world ofthe dead. The priests were going to recite a song of praise, but the people had preceded them, and they sang with a wordless voice, which spread out into the shadow of the lake.

Sorkus searched once more for the outlines of the raft, but he could no longer see it. Like the children sacrificed some time before in the other drifting boat, his father hoped to meet the gods. He returned to the lap from which he was born and to which his ears united him all his life.

Father and his gods, his parents gods that spoke to him. No one will ever believe as much as he believed. Father! Do the gods live there, have you seen them? Are they the same ones that spoke to you, these horrible faces that are born from the water? Can beauty be born from stench?

Another light on the lake caught his attention, a torch on a small boat that was also moving away from the shore where he had seen the foreigners. Suddenly, he felt a fear that forced him to abandon the ceremony and run. Something was telling him that he was not wrong, that ideas did not come by themselves, that when the soul felt something, it had taken shape somewhere in the world. Those who followed him could not catch up with him. He ran, and the distance to the hut seemed much greater than what he had traveled before.

The ground in front of the entrance had the footprints of his sons, and two other pairs of footprints surrounded them. Sorkus walked in and saw the couple on the beach. They were waiting for him, the man sitting and she standing next to her, with a hand on her husband's shoulder. The guards had disappeared. He asked about his children. He had to search in the shadows for the answer, they had not lit the fire, or they had put it out before he arrived. The man stood up, put his hand around the woman's waist, and said:

-My name is Zaid, son of Tol and grandson of Zor the Betrayer. That's what they called my grandfather. You should know because Reynod gave him that name.

Sorkus remembered the story of the exiled family, of the punishment of the gods for the fault of the eldest and the sacrifice of his sisters. Reynod used to tell him those events when he spoke to him about the town.

-I don't know why you come back, if your family has been execrated. But now I care about knowing where my children are.

She had approached Zaid, as tall as he was, but his narrow back contrasted with Sorkus' broad chest. A strange smell came from the woman. He looked at her for a moment, and had the fleeting sensation that he was seeing only a cold shadow.

"You saw the boat," answered Tol's son. "A short, narrow boat to hold two children on a not too long trip." The waters will be in charge of guiding them.

Sorkus couldn't answer. A hand squeezed his insides and he vomited up what the priests had given him to drink at the ceremony. Then he began to gather blankets, pick up the cold meat abandoned in the fathoms, and put everything in a bag that he carried on his back.

"Go look for them," Zaid told him while he watched him do it. "The old man you killed will make room for you, the men you annihilated in battle are waiting for you." Your father is waiting for you too. He, who all his life was looking for this place.

Before leaving, Sorkus turned around once more. He saw that the son of Tol had something shining in his hand. The stiletto, he thought. But it wasn't fear, however, that invaded his face as he walked away toward the lake.

It was desperation.

*

The guardians had not left him alone during the funeral, but when his sister left the ceremony, Britan became mixed up in the confusion. The people had gotten out of control and were invading the places reserved for the priests. Some looked at Sorkus, who was walking away back to the huts, and wondered what had happened, why his boss was running away like that.

Britan ran in the same direction as his brother, but Sorkus was too far away, hidden from him by the shade of the trees. Before reaching the huts, he saw him pass by him in the darkness in the opposite direction, but that

shadow was moving away again towards the beach. On the shore of the lake he found him crouching and pushing a raft.

"Sorkus!" he shouted, but the other had already got on and was rowing. Britan wanted to get into the water, but the smell was unbearable. He turned away from the waves that stained his feet with thick clumps. He stood observing the dark silhouette of his brother in the light of the half moon, rocking the boat with rhythmic and slow firmness. Entering the edge of what could no longer be seen, into the deepest waters, into the center of the imprecise area that could not even be glimpsed during the day. The movement of the oars could still be distinguished, but the dull murmur of the waves was now the only constant sound.

In the town, rumor of Sorkus's disappearance had spread, and many gathered around the priests' huts. The guards tried to stop them, but the people were talking and shouting. Only the obligation of silenceor for the third day of funerals he made them maintain a weak calm for the rest of the night. The women did not sleep, nor could they look away from the area where the rebels continued their wait. The priests gave orders to avoid mischief, but they were unable to find out if anyone had seen Sorkus after he fled.

Britan did not wish to appear before them until the next morning. Hidden behind the first trees of the forest, he watched them enter Reynod's hut with worried faces, gesticulating and raising words of betrayal in their voices. They would let that night pass without resolutions to show that they controlled the conflicts. They would pretend to sleep, too, until dawn had advanced sufficiently.

The town in your hands. What an unfortunate inheritance you left us, father! This is over.

Britan went to bed thinking about his fiancée, about his exile plans. But he couldn't leave without at least knowing what had happened to Sorkus, and the thought of obligation to the people was no less, either. He had finally fallen asleep, when not long after they woke him up.

-Sir, there is a Council meeting. The priests look for him.

Briton nodded. He could no longer postpone the matter any longer.

"Am I going as a prisoner?" He asked.

-No sir. The absence of his brother has nullified all his orders.

He looked down into the valley. The smoke from the campfires rose like every morning. He thought he had slept very little, but the sun broke the handfuls of shade in which the children had rested. They looked thin, the

same as everyone born since the lakeside settlement. The men went from family to family, probably distributing or seeking news.

From the center of the town came the call of a hunting horn, sinking and breaking the cold air. They looked for the source of the sound, and saw a caravan moving along the road towards the main huts. But they realized that they were only the stragglers of many other groups that had perhaps passed through that place long before dawn. And through the barrier of trees, a huge group of people appeared, emerging from Reynod's hut, circling the center of the town and returning.

Britan and the guard approached. It was strange that people had not yet shown their discontent with more violent displays than that caravan. Those who saw him arrive made way for him, and that respect flattered him. But he soon knew that he had been wrong. The faces of timid obedience looked forward, where a man and a woman walked playing music. He saw the instrument that emitted that sound, a skull that the man blew into each empty orbit, alternately, covering one with his fingers, sometimes open, sometimes more closed. The skull also had other small holes that created many other different shades. The wind seemed to travel through every corner of the skull, the traces of the veins, the labyrinths of the bone, until it came out not only as a dry sound, but carrying a certain flavor of time.

A tone that, as it filled the air around the caravan, became deep, so low that no human voice could have imitated it. However, Britan thought he heard, between the pauses, the screech of a bird. Although it wasn't exactly that either, but, perhaps, the cry of a child.

Next to the man, the woman was beating a rudimentary drum. Her hands seemed like two black wings that collided stubbornly on the surface of the drum, and the sound she made was more like a flutter than a percussion.

-Who are they? -She wanted to know, but the guards couldn't answer her.

"They say he is Tol's son," an old man who had approached them told him.

"That's right," some women confirmed. "He is the firstborn of Tol and grandson of Zor."

"Is he coming in favor of the rebels?" Britan asked.

-We don't know, that's how it should be, because his family was always helped by them.

However, neither the old man nor the women wanted to commit themselves. They were all just guesses, they replied, and then turned away.

The caravan had reached Reynod's hut. Britan sighed deeply and walked with the guards. A group blocked their way, but he ignored them and ordered his men to advance. The struggles turned into blows between the guards and those defending the strangers. Britano managed to enter the hut. He saw several of Sorkus' men standing next to the priests.

"Sit down," they told him.

-But who are...?

-Sir...-one of the priests interrupted him.-...there is an unexpected fact. Another one, that's how it is, and we can't change it. You have been a witness, you know the truth. You will have to testify when you are asked to do so, and it will be soon. Tol's son is arriving.

He looked towards the entrance. The guards who had come were no longer there. Others now formed a free space in front of the hut, and among the exclamations of the people, theson of Tol. He carried the skull hanging from a rope tied to his belt. The woman followed him, backlit by the morning sun. Her slender figure passed between the gazes of the men, who could not take their eyes off her.

"It rejoices me to see him who heals the sick," said Zaid. "I have fond memories of another man who also did it, and he taught me many things. He was the son of Markus the Light-Eyed. I got this knife from him.

His voice was cheerful, free of any worry, even irony. There was even a slight smile under his beard. His left hand rested on her wife's shoulder, tapping his fingers on her bones, as if he were playing a flute. He glanced at her from time to time, and the woman responded with a roll of her eyes, an almost imperceptible movement of her curls. She seemed to be always talking to him, communicating orders that he was in charge of expressing in words.

The knife in her hands was made of bone, and she was offering it to him, but Britan ignored it.

"The son of Tol," said the priest who had spoken before, "he asked us this morning to summon the people in the manner you have seen." He told us the same thing we saw when Reynod was shrouded. He wasn't unaware of it, despite having left when he was a child. He has asked for your presence and your opinion without having met you before. You must listen to it.

Britan wondered the reason for so much respect for the one whose family had been execrated by his father, and that doubt was in his eyes, in the immoderate expression of anger on his face.

"Don't be afraid," Zaid told him. "I haven't come to destroy the people or defend the rebels." I came with the intention of unifying you and directing you on the path of truth.

The woman rested a hand on her husband's arm. He nodded, looking at her sideways for a moment.

-But let's not delay any longer. I offer you this knife. I want you to touch and caress him just as you would a woman. I want you to smell it, to put it against your chest and on your legs. Until you remember.

Britan looked at the others, but no one seemed to know more than what he had told himself so far. Zaid's voice dominated the time inside the hut, and his thin, tall body was a kind of pylon around which the others revolved.

"Your father..." said that voice, curiously increasingly distant as his hands touched the edge of the knife, the whitish edges or stained with red dots, the handle worn by the friction of his fingers. He could not take his eyes off the weapon, from that whiteness that was no longer white.

white, yellow fat adhered to its original shape

the mold from which he had been born, he saw it with clear intensity as time gave him moments to touch the knife

I know him, but...I don't know, I don't know who or what he is

-Reynod was castrated.

perhaps, from the known world, from the cabin, Zaid continued talking to him, but he did not listen too carefully.

I see the leg, the man and the leg, what a prodigy of the dream, I see it, the severed leg and I

He exchanged a quick glance with the woman, and felt his heart skip a beat, a shock and a twisting of her insides. The pain went from her belly to her leg, and she felt such weakness that she could not stand.

such a rapid illness, or was he the one who was already in another time, traveling through overlapping spaces, seeing the world and its stories like someone flying on the back of a great bird over a village, his own village before and after having been created?

He staggered and fell on his good knee, although he saw nothing wrong with the other despite the pain. Some came to help him, but this time it was the woman who spoke. She stopped the men with a wave of her hand and approached Britan. She kissed him on the cheek and eased her grief.

"Pain remembers," she murmured. "Pain does not make mistakes."

-Pain passes from man to man, from father to son... -It was he who was speaking, reciting from a distance as close as his own bones.

the knife belonged to him by inheritance: the leg bone

It's my leg and it's not, it belongs to my body and yet they haven't torn it off.

-Who did you kill to build it? -He asked when he got up. He pushed the woman aside and confronted Zaid.

He knew he was asking useless questions, but using his voice and feeling that he could still control his own body at will, served to briefly cover the truth with a sheen of bait, until he could understand it.

-Your father killed your father.

"Do not speak with darkness or with phrases stolen from the gods," he answered.

"But if you don't believe in the gods..." Zaid reproached him. "If you have seen the flesh of men and have cut it hundreds of times until two nights ago." You must let your fingers touch your thoughts so that ideas arise.

Britan shouted. Nobody expected him to react like this, he, who had always seemed so precariousI saw, so controlled and wise for his youth. It was a short scream from the wind that brushed the walls of his chest, making him bleed breaths, lumps of earth from the history of his body re-sprouted and buried and then unearthed again. It was part of a circle where the consistency of the bones became as fragile as what he had felt in his hands when amputating the warriors.

I know who is the seed of my creation, whose words that name me and create me, where is now the life of the one I was, and his voice, the one that has named me, without my name I am no longer, I do not see myself In the face of others, I no longer have what I had, I no longer have what I am, my name.

The woman touched his forehead, and Britan moved away from her as if in contact with ice.

Zaid told Reynod's story for the rest of the afternoon, though not how he had met her. He conveyed it as if he had always known her, as if she had been alive longer than he let on. Showing a wisdom that he was part of, and not that he had acquired over time. He was young, although somewhat emaciated, but from his eyes, from the lips between which the story flowed, a force emerged that no one dared to interrupt.

Not even the bustle of people outside the hut seemed to distract those listening. A rumor had also reached there that Tol's son was telling things about the town's past, and the barely heard words spread by word of mouth throughout the region.

The hut resembled a forest where a clearing served as a resting place for the hunter. But the hunter did not need to run or chase his prey, because they had crouched at his feet, awaiting the hands that stalked them, the movement of the lips, the snap of the fingers, and a look from her, the hunter's wife. .

When dusk came and the screeching of the night birds stopped Zaid's story, he looked up at the roof of the hut, as if he could see through it. The screams of some children returning from their games in the neighboring forests joined the shouting of the women who called them. The murmur of the people rose again, and the priests were restless.

-We decided... -said one of them-... given the death of our spiritual guide, whom we will not deny, and the disappearance of his immediate successor, the appointment of a new family to guide us. The causes of his exile have already been erased by new events. What was said here should not be repeated. Whoever disobeys…-and looked at Britan-…he will be subjected to our laws. After the third day of the funeral, celebrations will be prepared for Tol's first-born son, Zor's grandson.

Britan went to bed knowing that this would be his last night in town. They wouldn't wait too long to kill him. But he was thinking of Sorkus. His other brother did not concern him; mixed with the people and lost in his work as a craftsman long before, he had ceased to be a concern for the priests.

His fiancée had arrived in the middle of the night to run away together.

"No," he told her. "I'll stay and wait for Sorkus." We'll hide until he comes back.

-But they are going to kill us!- She cried on Britan's chest.

Then he hugged her and lay on top of her, while he caressed her straight, dark hair.

"Zaid's wife is very beautiful, isn't she?" she asked.

He nodded, but the memory of that woman disturbed him, and he rejected the mere fact of comparing them as something repulsive. Zaid's wife had beauty, but something uncertain made her more in line with her touch than with the vision of that beauty of hers. When he looked at her, he felt her skin vibrate with screams. She had also smelled, that afternoon, a sour aroma that did not come from any of the men, because he had known

them for a long time, nor did it come from Zaid. It was the smell of women, he was not wrong, but more like the acrid sweetness of dead and decomposed flesh.

-Too beautiful to be true, I think.

She raised her head to look at him, surprised, however she was exhausted from crying and closed her eyelids again.

At dawn, she left the hut and looked at the cloudless sky. The pale glow of winter prevailed over the sporadic spots of the sun that broke out behind the flocks coming ashore. Because not all the bodies from the battle had yet been buried, and those that were had clay graves, which cracked when they dried.

The smell of the lake, despite everything, had accustomed them, and they would hardly have noticed if it had not been for the birds that descended and took pieces of meat from the corpses in their beaks. The wings passed lower and lower, making fleeting shadows. Other birds followed the scavengers, perched on the branches of the trees bordering the field and waited their turn. Herds of goats stirred as they heard the squawks. , and they jumped against the fences.

His fiancée had come out and she was holding his arm. He had a scared look as he looked towards the field, his eyes were like two small black pebbles. He kissed her and understood her fear.

-Let's prepare the provisions. There are some caves that the lake has left free on the beach.

They abandoned the hut and the town. They looked back several times as they walked away, but little by little the doubts were erased, and what they initially believed was nostalgia was lost in the darkness of doubt. When he looked forward again, it was already someone else. The knowledge, he told himself, was not going to be lost for any reason. If his constant uncertainty regarding the gods was of any use to her, it was that it confirmed him as an independent creature, a body that could feed itself and a mind capable of thinking without help. He was a soul whose memories turned into nightmares or premonitions could be hidden every morning when he woke up, under the incandescent reflections of the sun.

They took the path that led to the lake, surrounded by a new aroma of green, of vegetation sprouted with the rains. On the beach, they looked for the caves.

"We are very close to the hollows of the warriors," she said, and suddenly looked up. "What is that?"

Britan looked at the thin black line suspended in the sky.

-What the messengers said, what stopped the war in our favor. He's been there for three or more days. But let's forget this, I only care about my brother.

He knew that the wait would be imprecise, and that at some point they would have to leave, even if Sorkus never returned.

They found an empty cave, the walls covered with moss and the blurred marks of the level that the waters had occupied. The algae replaced the original stench, but they burned spices anyway to insulate themselves from the aroma of the lake. The birds' feces were used to feed the soil, and the vines grew to cover the entrance over the days. Since not even the children were going to play there, it could be a long time before anyone found them.

For a few nights afterward they heard singing, festive drumming, and shouting. The festivals in honor of Tol's son had begun. They would climb a high rock, and from afar they could see the bonfires, hear the beating of the drums and wooden instruments. The black line on the lake disappeared behind the smoke as the festivities progressed. Then the screams of the warriors were heard again and did not stop.

Standing on that rock, him upright, his hair long, his beard never too thick, she holding his arm, small, fearful, observing him timidly, they saw the clouds and the suns of many days pass by, they heard the sounds of the men on the horizon. change the course and destiny of the town. The new powers whose laws and customs they guessed from the songs, the mass movements and the raised dust.

"The war has started again," he murmured, staring at the green shadow of the trees that hid the valley.

She, trembling, attached to Britan like a fearful animal, could not help but transmit her trembling to him.

One morning they saw a dot swinging over the waters, slowly approaching. As it grew larger and clearer, they recognized the raft on which Sorkus had set out. A man was inside, sitting, with his back hunched, his arms fallen and his head against his chest. The sun was shining brightly over his head, but the thin, constant fog shadowed the surface of the lake.

The raft ran aground in the surf. The waves pushed her, the man woke up. Britan recognized his brother's face. Sorkus stood up and began to push himself towards the beach with the remains of a board. There was little progress that could be made.

"I have to help him," he said, and ran into the water despite her pleas to avoid him.

Sorkus had jumped and his body was sunk up to his waist. He walked weakly against the waves, carrying on his shoulders a bundle that he had taken out of the raft. As he approached, Britan saw that the bundle was no longer one but two, and Sorkus carried them without looking ahead, but towards the waves that surrounded him. When his brother finally looked up, he said to her:

-You should have run away.

His voice could barely be heard above the sound of the water and that other strange sound, those vague moans that came from the bottom of the lake. As soon as Britan touched his arm with the tips of his fingers, Sorkus looked at him in panic and began to cry, as if he had broken the tense membrane in his eyes.

His face was contorted under his beard, his cry was hoarse. He raised his arms, the bundles were tied together around his neck and hung on his back, then he hugged his brother. Britan didn't remember that anymaybe I would have done it.

They walked towards the cave and Sorkus lay down on the ground next to the fire as soon as he entered. Britan helped him remove the wet furs. His body was covered with worms and larvae mixed in the hair or stuck to the skin. He heated some water, and with a wet cloth he began to remove the parasites one by one. Sorkus shouted, without taking his eyes off the corner where he had left the packages. He saw his brother's wife, but he didn't say anything. Britan understood and asked him to leave them alone.

Then Sorkus spoke.

-I rowed all night and the next day. I could see the sun, very clearly above me, but the fog did not allow me to see beyond the length of the raft. I heard calling voices, splashing, and every time I turned around, there was nothing but fog and foul water. Many times I was on the verge of capsizing, I felt hands clinging to the raft, others touching me. But the shadows immediately disappeared under the water. I knew they were constantly watching me, challenging me to make me forget my search. I tried to see my children's boat. I sailed for I don't know how long, but I never found the other coast. The waters were calmer, they thickened, and the boat stopped, until the oars broke and I abandoned myself to the current, if it existed. I don't think I had even reached the center of the lake yet, and that center was my hope of finding them. Everything around me, the stillness, the fog, the muffled screams, those hidden gestures of formless beings, treated me as if I were already dead.

Sorkus coughed and drank from the vessel his brother offered him.

-I think I was dead while I was walking around the lake, is it possible? They are not the wounded that you have tried to heal, nor the recently dead that are leaving your hands. The life that escapes through the fingers,

brother, my brother... -And he said this crying and resting a palm on Britan's face.- They are different, they are parts of something else. Each fragment of those bodies cries isolated, waiting to form the whole that is not its original being, but another greater one. All of them united and separated at the same time, that is death. A breakup in continuous dissolution, a loss that never ends. The eternal wait without hope. That is, and that is why I understood, when I found my children's boat, its rocking on the water, the mist that inhabited it and that had displaced the life of their bodies, now lying and still. The pounding of the waves, small and hard as clubs, like handfuls of earth, would never wake them up, nor would my calls or my crying.

“But someone could. The one who had taken their lives was going to give it back. I jumped into the water and swam between hands that held me and faces that spoke to me with voices made of dirty water and mouths full of algae. I got to the boat and got on. They were naked and had blue skin, their eyes still open and swollen, their bodies brittle like two dry branches. I wrapped them in the blankets I had brought and tied them to my body. Then I rowed with some sticks that I ripped from the other boat as much as I could until I lost control of myself, not knowing which direction I was taking. Drifting, drifting...always. If that was a lake, I told myself, one day it would arrive.”

Sorkus fell asleep, repeating those words until they became a murmur. Britan covered him with blankets, but his brother had chills the rest of that day and night.

When he woke up, Sorkus was already up and preparing the packages to carry them.

"Run away!" He told him while he hugged him more tightly than before. "My life has only one day left, but you are going to be saved." You must obey me this time, by all the gods or by all that you respect. I know what I'm saying. If you see our brother Cesius, let him go with you.

Britan couldn't help but regret bitterly when he felt that hug. No one, not even a woman, had ever held him like that.

-Oh brother! From what seed were we born, what punishments are we paying?

"From the seed of lament, from the pain of the gods we are flesh," said Sorkus.

They saw him walking towards the valley, and they got ready to leave.

-Where are we going? -She asked when she saw how many directions and how much uncertainty surrounded them.

They had been told that beyond the fields to the west of the Drionne was the sea, and farther still, the cliffy shores where the green lands began, full of gentle animals that could be raised in great numbers. Lands where fresh water from the rains did not produce food for the dead, but was clear and tasty.

That's where they headed, just the first steps took them away from the town that would never accept them again.

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Tahia made battle clothing all night. In the morning, she helped Zaid put on the black jacket that left his arms free, closed in front with straps. The skirt was made of goatskin, with a belt that served as support for the cuch. Markus illo.

He put the bow and the case with arrows on her back. Then Zaid asked him for the painting. She then prepared, as she had done long before, by a clear river, one morning after milking the goats, while the dogs watched her from the door of a hut. This time, however, there was no fresh water, but a dirty and inexhaustible lake. And both, man and water, were different. Another man different from the one that morning. She, above all, was not just another, but something else, completely altered although apparently similar, something definitive now.

Tahia dipped her fingers into the pot with her paintings. She ran them over Zaid's cheeks, making two black marks that ran from her ears and down to her lips. Then he closed his eyes, and she drew a dark halo around her. When she opened them, she had two shadows inhabited by the white spheres of her eyes. Zaid put on the feather cap Sorkus had worn at the funeral. She kissed him on the lips and stood in the doorway, watching him leave with his warriors.

As she walked, she felt that those watching feared her in the same way she had feared Reynod when he was a child. The priests also looked at him with a certain meekness; not even they would have achieved such adhesion, such deep respect from the people. Everyone seemed to see in him something greater than his simple body, a strength undoubtedly greater than his own daily human fatigue. It was no longer about the family's claim, his father or his grandfather were forever immersed in the shadow of the town, because they were nothing more than men.

I do not have the weapons that time could give me, nor the men prepared with what I have learned on my journey. But I must win to convince them. Then there will be no forces to displace me from my place,

and they will be the ones who will die before seeing me far from the place where they put me.

He still didn't trust anyone but Tahia. The men who were going to fight alongside her were her age, but she didn't remember them. Some had dared to give her a friendly glance, but when they met her austere expression, they lowered their gaze. They offered him a spear, and he felt clumsy with those sullen instruments. The memory of the weapons he had seen elsewhere made him angry, regretting that he had not had time to change the customs of war. But in the absence of proper weapons, he would use skill. Messengers had brought him reports that the rebels were getting supplies through the women, who arrived every day through different forest paths. They had rested during the truce, had grown stronger, and would resist Zaid despite the waters hanging over them.

Tahia told him that she would never do anything more for him than that: the cloud of water hanging in the sky. But it didn't matter. Today he was part of his people again, a member recognized and valued above all others. He had stopped being the driver of the dead, he was the one who commanded them: they were his support, his allies.

The clash of spears accompanied them. They were climbing a hill to the east of the lake, which led to the battlefield. The gray sky with storm clouds paled the brightness of the day, the sun slowly peeked through the movement of those clouds that arrived from the north. The trees were decreasing in number, the bushes became shorter, with broad and thorny leaves, then the landscape expanded into a mud plain in which hundreds of scavenger birds searched for remains. Then the ground began to crack, rising on the sides and forming walls until reaching a ravine. They saw, in the distance, the black line in the sky, erased in parts by the clouds. Against the northern shore of the lake, were the columns of the trapped faithful, and to the right, the smoke from the rebels' bonfires.

They began to go down the most wooded slope to hide. But even before they reached the clearing where the slope and the ravine ended, they heard the cry of the enemy's advance. He hadn't even had time to prepare the formations, but Zaid knew that their number was greater.

"Forward!" he shouted, his arm raised toward the hundred men to the left of him.

They moved forward, their strength and anger restored, but in disarray. The ranks broke up as soon as they formed, tripping and hitting each other, wasting their strength in useless fights.

-Advance! Unite en masse!

The warriors were arranged in a formation like the tip of an arrow, and the spears pointed forward.

The rebels appeared from behind the trees that hid the ravine. Their screams grew like an overflowing river and were enveloped in clouds of dust. They were angry, more so than he had expected, and he saw that the black line in the sky had disappeared.

The faithful formed a barrier thatThe others tried to win with a frontal blow, but soon changed their strategy and began to surround them like a group of dogs around a wheel. The axes hit the front ranks, and they defended themselves by crossing the spears as shields. But one of the men on the barrier fell. The mass cracked as one after another fell, and the rebels entered through the gap.

"Forward!" Zaid ordered the next formation.

The archers were the only ones he had managed to give instructions to before the battle, perhaps enough because now they were advancing slowly but with bows and arrows ready. The front row knelt.

-Shoot!

The arrows formed a wide arc and fell on the men surrounding the circle. New waves knocked down the following ranks. He knew that many of his own men would die this time, the circle was an indistinguishable mix of warriors from both sides. But he was confident that the rebels had put all their people into that attack.

The third group prepared to advance, but carried stones instead of arrows.

"Change the arrows for rocks!" He shouted, and went with them to attack, while a dozen men protected his flanks.

"Forward!" And his voice dispersed through the tight and enraged bodies that advanced. Everyone looked at him for a moment, their eyes bright and watery, their hair wet with sweat, their mouths open and panting. They advanced without stopping, raising their arms with shouts of fury that grew from mouth to mouth, until there was a chorus of gasps, loud steps and blows of spears and stones.

They threw the stones against the large, already broken wheel of the rebels, as if their breath and not their muscles had thrown them.

They penetrated the circle and formed cracks and gaps in the center. The faithful fought with rocks in their fists. The rebels only had old spears that soon broke. The stones hit the skulls and a red mass oozed out between the bones and the men died in the mud. Some of the wounded remained standing, hacking axes around them, but then they gave way and fell on top of each other, their heads mingled on each other's open bellies, on the earth that had gotten into the wounds of those who had not yet died.
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The wheel of the rebels was slowly destroyed.

The smell of the enemies, he thought, as his hands sank into the rebels' chests, was more distinguishable than their faces, because they were all covered in blood and black with mud. They all looked the same, except for what their heads contained, and the only way to know was to open them, smash the skulls with stones, find the thoughts and destroy them.

Cut the shapes of the mind by cutting the shapes of the viscera.

He saw how the bones of the enemies rose from the earth, how the other bodies fell on the splinters of his allies, of the men who had recently looked at him as if he were a new god. And that was the triumph, to contemplate the lives that fought for him and died for his cause, penetrated by spears like the sharp fingers of the gods.

When the sun set that afternoon, it was just a mutilated sphere on the horizon, dark orange, shining against an almost black sky, giving only a little light to the surviving men. No one else appeared behind the ravine. The rebel leaders had fled, and their absence gave Zaid the victory.

His men surrounded him and watched him, still despite the pain on his face. Some had sat down, others were supporting the wounded and those who had lost their legs. Many dragged broken weapons, and the remains of bows hung in front of their wounded chests.

But none of them failed to respond to his call, and they listened to him.

-I will not allow disobedience or disorders. As long as we are here, we will fight. We are not going to underestimate the enemies.

They looked at the bodies of the fallen rebels around them, kicked them and cursed furiously, echoing Zaid's words.

"Sir," said his second. "We have to go back."

-No! We will watch in case they attack again. Tomorrow we will be safer.

He had water brought from a stream to wash himself and give the men drink.

The roads were clear and the rebels had disappeared. But he knew there were more behind the forest north of the lake. He took off his war clothes, burned them, and tried to sleep. He opened his eyes for a moment to murmur a prayer Tahia had taught him for the end of the battle. He reproached himself for forgetting to say it before, and he hated his arrogance.

My victory, or yours, perhaps. Theirs, who live in the lake, the remains of men, the imperishable remains of the water that feeds itself. It will move forward in search of all these blind bodies that surround me today. We will

have tothrow us tomorrow. But tonight they will smell the carrion and flood the world to take it away, and it will be clean again.

She, the great goddess of carrion.

The one who cleans the rottenness of the world and loads it into her belly.

At dawn, the warriors prepared to return to the town. But before leaving, Zaid saw that some men were carrying hoes to bury their people.

He forbade it.

"Sir!" some protested, looking at him with a hand on their forehead to protect themselves from the sun, which had come out strong and blinding that morning.

"Obedience!" Was the only thing he said in response.

He waited. He would wait as long as necessary until he obtained complete loyalty. Zaid's body was not large, but standing there, with the blood-stained fur blanket covering his shoulders, his torso seemed to breathe a renewed, angry air. The men only smelled stench and saw crows fluttering around them. But he breathed an air of triumph that made him resemble a god made man more than ever. They owed him the victory, and that was something they could never deny him.

Then one of them dropped the hoe. Others were heard falling later. The men retreated crestfallen to their ranks, passing in front of their leader without looking at him. None of them looked up, none of them made a single moan, not even a murmur. They took up their weapons, formed rows and columns, carried the wounded, and began to walk slowly back to the town.

Zaid followed them like a father watching over his scolded children. He could not stop some from turning to look at the dead, nor stop hearing the silent moan of those glances. He felt in them the same fear that he had had as a child: the anxiety of leaving them unearthed. He would have wanted to say something to them, but those eyes evaded him, escaped over his shoulders further back. And there was something that he realized he would never be able to control. The singular pity of those eyes fixed on the abandoned companions, greater even than the fear of the gods.

"Look ahead!" He shouted at them, and everyone resumed their places and positions. A murmur rose from the ranks, made deeper by the echo between the walls, as if it came from the stone itself. But the rocks became lower, until a smooth path replaced them to lead them to the valley.

The women were waiting for them, they followed them in silence with sad faces, sure of the answer to the question they did not dare to ask. Some

dared to approach and clung to the arms of the warriors, asking where they had left the others.

When they reached the first huts, a crowd followed them and cheered, throwing green leaves collected by the children while they fought, and then burnt leaves smelling of incense and oils. They had lit new bonfires, sacrificed animals in their honor and that of the gods who had granted them victory. Columns of smoke rose from across the valley. More elderly men, women and children continually came to meet them. Wreaths of flowers were thrown into the air. The dancers had begun to dance on the same altar where Reynod had been laid to rest. The drums beat at a dizzying pace. The aroma of cooked meat traveled with the wind.

But the widows stayed behind, squeezing the arms of the straggling men who tried to ignore them. At the end of the caravan, Zaid arrived. They looked at him defiantly, then gave up. They changed their anger into pleading, they returned to the lake.

Zaid was lifted on the shoulders of men wearing the clothes they wore at festivals, others were playing musical instruments with flowers in their hair and hands. They covered him with flower necklaces, bathed his head with balms. The priests were waiting for him at the altar to give him official honors. They carried him there, while he saluted with the beatific expression of someone who was more than a man, because he had given them a triumph that the previous man who spoke with the gods had not been able to give them.

Tahia accompanied him up the altar. The kiss they gave was cheered by the people.

-Let us give endless gratitude to Tol's son. "He has saved us from the great crisis of our people," said one of the priests.

Zaid would be anointed with the oil that Reynod had created and brought with him the day he arrived in town more than forty winters earlier.

-We anoint you, new spiritual guide, with the approval of your predecessor. From now on you will be our guide until the gods take you.

The hand passed in front of Zaid's face twice, without touching him. Then he settled on her, she molded herself to his shape. And his smell took him back to the distant times of his childhood, to the memories of the witcher and the pain of his sex.

His face frowned under the old man's hand, but no one saw it, perhaps only the priest felt in his palm that his featuresnes had moved. When his hand released it, it no longer showed signs of suffering, nothing remained but an impassive mask in which, as some would later say, there was nothing.

And as he removed his hand and felt the warmth of the sun, he saw, for an instant, Sorkus's face in the crowd.

The old man continued with the honors. The bustle continued around them. That's why he forgot about that face for a long time. They expected him to speak, but Tahia indicated discretion. She put her arm around him, and stood still beside her, with the soft smile of a submissive woman, pleasing to all the other women in the village.

But Sorkus appeared again. His unmistakable face was becoming clearer and closer. A space of silence and wonder grew as he walked towards the altar. He was dirty and weak, but it was him.

Those whose backs were turned turned when they saw the panic in Zaid's eyes. Sorkus advanced slowly, displacing people with just his presence. His hair and beard were still covered with dirt from the lake, his tattered clothes covering only his waist and thighs. His legs barely seemed to support him. Two bundles tied with leather straps hung from his shoulders.

Sorkus's eyes were staring at him, filled with anger.

That noon the sun shone with an intensity that no one remembered it having had in at least the last five years. Summer was beginning. However, Sorkus had his own shadow in his eyes, and Zaid could see in them what he had seen in the days spent at the lake.

Sorkus stepped on the altar. The boards creaked. The guards didn't even approach him. The priests retreated.

Zaid only looked at the feet, not the eyes, he would not look at the eyes again. He murmured into Tahia's ears.

-You didn't tell me that he would come back, that he was going to be as strong as me with his return.

She didn't answer him.

Sorkus arrived in front of him and stopped. They looked at each other. One, tall and erect, covered with honors and perfumed with oils and flowers, with a woman at his side and the favor of the people. The other, bent over by the weight of the foul-smelling packages, almost naked and surrounded by shadows.

Sorkus untied the knots. He threw the bodies of his children one after the other. The corpses were swollen, the open mouths showed their teeth like two smiles, and foul-smelling liquids gushed from the pustules.

Screams arose from the people. The priests covered their mouths.

Zaid felt something in his throat.

"I remember a dream..." he murmured.

But the voice of Sorkus, the voice of the promising son of the witcher, was then heard invading all the spaces that the sun of the new summer now illuminated.

-It's not a dream, this time. They, the lost ones, told me that your wife has returned from that place. I want my children to come back.

Zaid had been waiting for that request ever since he saw it arrive.

"You don't want to..." he began to say, but then he raised a hand and motioned for her to come closer. It was the gesture of someone willing to confide, and there seemed to be compassion in his eyes. A look of friendship that the entire town understood as a sign of his benevolence.

"When you see them, you'll regret it," he told her in a low voice, because he knew Tahia was listening to him. "You're not sure what you're asking for..."

Sorkus had his dirty, cut face very close to him. He could smell more than just his skin, he could sense fear, like an animal smells its prey.

He placed a hand on Sorkus's cheek, who did not move away, and wiped away the tears that fell on the children's bodies.

Then, Zaid's right hand searched for something under his robe. Reynod's stiletto suddenly flashed in the morning light, and he blinded Sorkus an instant before his shout. Before the blade pierced his heart, and he fell dead on his children, covering them with the same blood with which they had been conceived. THE WINGED WARRIORS

They chose moonless nights, when it was just a line or perhaps a sphere no bigger than any other star, even paler. Or when the clouds covered the entire sky, and the nights then resembled blindness. Nights as dark as the Enchantress's eyes, the women affirmed.

They knew that those eyes were blind, totally white, lacking the black dot and the clear circle that alternated light and shadow. But the old sorceress had seen everything through the eyes of others. She had drunk the light through others, she had been fed by their blood and strengthened by her flesh. The bones of the others propped up her fragile legs. Those who ever saw her said that her legs were like two dry branches about to break, held by two linked snakes. Her hands, two fleshless handfuls of broken phalanges caressing the scales of the vipers.

They waited for her. The youngest ones crouched behind the bushes. The older ones, without fear but ecstatic with respect, had gathered around a bonfire.

The flames grew. They illuminated the clearing in the middle of the forest. Behind the standing women, who had held hands, were the old women. They had their heads bowed and their eyes fixed on the ground. They swayed back and forth, with a dull, even murmur coming from their closed lips.

The young women trembled, hidden by the bushes. They were cold, but their mothers had assured them that at the end of that night they would be women. When the Enchantress appeared, the old woman's eyes would feed on them, and youth would be lost in the air, condensed in the breeze stopped between the highest leaves of the trees. Then they would scream, to become ageless women. Chosen. Experienced. With the knowledge of the world in their bellies.

Three old women fed the fire, passing branches and spices to each other. The aromas invaded the forest, vague at first, countless after

midnight. The smell of blood filled the nostrils of the young women. Then, the smell of burning milk replaced it, until it merged with the humidity of the earth and fallen logs.

The women brought objects to the fire, things that had belonged to their ancestors, and that they had kept all their lives. Perhaps fragments of something larger, torn away before its final destruction. The women carried them wrapped in clean cloth, hidden under their skirts, after having rescued them from abandonment in a hole in their huts. The men had stood watching them as they walked off into the twilight toward the meeting that everyone knew was going to take place that night.

-Stay and sleep. "Don't even dream," they ordered their men and their children.

They felt a chill run through their bodies, but they remained silent and locked themselves in their homes.

All of them, not a single woman who was past childbearing age, refused to hand over her belongings. The three old women went from the bonfire to the place where the others had gathered to give their offerings. It was a long line that didn't end even beyond the darkness between the trunks. They helped themselves with torches so as not to get lost on the paths that led to the forest, but they knew that they would have to turn them off when they arrived. Only the hands were necessary to meet each other, to feel the faces, the arms that brought the gifts. The old women returned to the bonfire, and the light exploded for a few moments with the new food they threw, but they lowered their eyes to the ground.

A strong smell of logs was mixed with the aroma of mud and feces. The smell of the earth came from the fire, from the wood that had fed on that earth, and dissolved into its original substances.

The young women peeked out from behind the branches, hiding their nakedness. They saw leather bands falling like small dead birds. Dolls in the shape of men, covered in white powder. Branches with dry leaves, dyed red. Some bags opened before falling into the fire, and the remains of unborn children were scattered among the embers. Entire uteruses were thrown into the fire, offered like open hearts on the palms of the old women.

Those who were praying raised their voices as the flames grew. An almost imperceptible tremor moved through the clasped hands. The old women shivered too, and the floor echoed with the patter of bare feet.

"The fragments of life..." they said, but their voices were lost in the crackling of the fire. The flames were high, the shadows of the trees danced and threatened to fall on them. A cold wind began to run through the upper branches, and the dance of the trees and the fire came alive in front of the static gaze of the old women.

Those in charge of the offerings went and returned with their arms full of indefinite elements. cough. Things that sometimes seemed to move on their own in his hands, but none of them had a precise color or a special smell. They were dry, as if the darkness had stolen their features before returning them to the fire. And when they burned, the objects cried with the aroma they gave off, tears with smells, just as the women now cried when they were handed over. The fire seemed to burn their faces, but it only illuminated them with implacable clarity.

The humidity of the night had disappeared. The heat of the bonfire covered everything with a dry, dusty layer of cracked earth. The mud had dried, the sweat vanished from the young girls' skins. Their naked bodies were like acacia leaves on a winter noon. Opaque, porous and ageless. They felt themselves getting older, but they did not cry. Always huddled together, against each other, behind the creeping bushes. Waiting.

Then they felt that something was staining their sex. Then the wind came. They touched the ground where they were sitting. They ran their hands through the shadows in which they had tried to protect themselves, and brought their fingers to their noses. They sniffed and screamed. They would have wanted to flee, but the nakedness held them back.

"Blood!" they shouted. They embraced. Some called their mothers. Her cries rose above the crackling of the fire.

The old women's prayer continued, indifferently. The young women rose from the earth covered in small puddles of blood and urine. Their bodies did not respond to them. Their bodies were different.

One of the old women in the circle turned her head toward her companion. The other nodded, and separated from the others. Those that remained closed the open gap. The messenger brought a dish to the bonfire, and she waited for it to warm up. Calmly, without showing impatience with her cries, she waited. She touched the wood, and satisfied with the temperature it had reached, she walked back to the circle, offering the fountain to the adult women.

In her turn, each one lowered her head for a moment, and the fountain filled with saliva. As she closed the round, the messenger spat in turn, and headed towards the young women.

They saw her approach, without stopping crying, her gaze changed to a grimace of relief. The woman extended a hand, and they all moved away, but the old woman was not going to touch them. She knelt in the mud with blood that gave off the smell of virgins' urine, and she supported her palms. She then picked up two handfuls of mud, and let it slide from her fingers until it fell into the fountain.

When she finished filling it, she mixed the contents of it with her right hand, while with her other hand she supported herself on the floor. Her body

moved with a slight sway, her eyes closed, as if she were carrying out a routine task. But beneath her worn clothes you could see the slow movement of her arms, and a shadow of light hair gave almost white hues to her neck and face. Her eyes sparkled as she opened her eyelids.

"Calm down, daughters, you have already done her work," she told them in a very low voice, she was not allowed to console them.

The young women closest to her understood, but the others continued to tremble before the old women's singing.

"The fragments of life are offered..." they repeated, without finishing, not interrupted, but creating the necessary expectation. They seemed to obey orders of a newly created plan and not the processes of a rite older than they could, perhaps, remember.

An icy wind descended from the high branches to the fire. The young women's blushes suffered a momentary relief, similar to a man's cold palm placed on their cheeks. The wind turned into drops of dew that fell from the leaves and stones, also sliding down the backs of the old women, who did not stop moving in a circle. They had increased the volume of their voices.

-The fragments of life are offered to the earth. The earth returns them…

Suddenly, they lowered their heads, without separating or stopping. They spun faster. The height of the flames surpassed them. The three porters had stopped, with some offerings in their hands. The young women silenced her murmuring, held hands and looked at the bonfire.

The messenger slowly got up with the fountain. You could see the effort she made to carry the vessel on her shoulders, but no one would help her, nor did she expect it. She was her task, and she had fulfilled it for more than half of her long life. She stood up straight, sighing. Then, she returned to the inside of the circle. The gap opened again just for her. The porters moved to one side and sat down to wait.

-The fragments of life...-said the prayer, always growing-...are offered to the earth. The earth returns them with the form... - They interrupted themselves to begin once again. Sometimes their distempered voices lost synchronicity, and each one began with any word of the prayer, giving new nuances to the chant.

The messenger approached the fgame. The flames almost touched her. She looked up, letting her warmth warm his face and color it with a blush. She was pleased with that contact, as if the sun were in front of her, gilding her skin. After her, she lifted the dish higher than the height of her head, and dropped the contents into the bonfire.

The strumming of the clashing fathoms, of the broken timbers, preceded the smoke that began to rise shortly after. First, only that sector of the

bonfire shone with more colors than simple reds and yellows. A purple, like that of sick trees or the skin of the dead, began to disperse until it encompassed all the flames. The bonfire looked like a huge flower with violet petals. A flower with many arms that crawled, some at ground level, others rising towards the trees.

-The earth returns life alive, in new forms. The forms seek new bodies…

The smell was intense. The young women covered their noses and mouths with their hands, but it was still impossible to avoid it. The smell was now part of her memories, and it came out even stronger, like corpses whose rot was released by the fire.

The young women cried again, scared of the smoke that surrounded them. They pressed against each other, rubbing their faces, but they could not find a single place on their skin where that aroma had not been impregnated. And the shape of the smell became the shape of the smoke, and the shape of the smoke was that of a cloud that spread throughout the forest. Adhering to the surface of things, penetrating them until things become smoke and aroma.

Leaves with the smell of death. Inert trunks. Earth with flabby muscles. Skin with a rigid texture.

Be all the beings of the forest.

Be the forest.

A lifeless forest, sustained by the smoke of the dead. Those who hold the earth on which men walk and women stand and pray.

Where men hunt.

The animals appeared.

No one had seen them before, but perhaps they had already been there since the beginning of the night. His eyes shone with the color of fire reflected in them. Very slight shades of white were glimpsed from time to time among the flames, and a pale reddish color arose for moments, and the white tongues mingled with the others. Then the red grew stronger, but the smell did not diminish, nor did the smoke.

The women continued their rounds, while a dark halo formed behind them. They turned to see the gleam of eyes peering through the trees and rocks. They were small stars forming a constellation around the women. And they were growing in number. Every time they looked, the stars grew larger, came closer, and various outlines were outlined behind them. The reflection of a light coat, the movement of an ear, the scratch of a paw on the stones, a moan, a barely outlined howl, a squawk with shame and anger.

Smoke covered the sky between the high branches, and began to descend again. It was cold, despite being born from flames. The women cried, even the oldest ones, when the smoke touched them. And he penetrated their clothes, touched their bodies with shapeless hands, shapeless fingers, but strong and multiple. She traveled without wind or breeze, not even the usual sounds of the forest giving her a sense of location or time.

Silence petrified the passing of the night.

The crackling of the bonfire was no longer a sound, but just another figure in the smoke.

The animals approached, and with each step they got rid of their fear. Their profiles became clear, solid as the earth at their feet. But the earth shook. A still very weak tremor, moving towards the bonfire, with the same intensity from all sides, to converge in the fire. Then the aroma became unbreathable. Some women fell to the ground, the others resisted the vertigo of the earth that disappeared, as if it were absorbing them and they let themselves be carried away, without bones or flesh, transmuted into dust.

The wolves stopped behind the circle.

Packs of brown wolves.

In groups, they emerged from the darkness, until they were still again, with their backs bristled, their tails erect, their ears erect, their snouts wet. The faces stood out with the luminosity of the flames. The reddish hair seemed like a crown around those looks that lacked the signs of time. Sensations and stimuli without a past, only reaction, reflections.

Then they moved their paws toward the bonfire, unafraid of the women who were watching them. Their footsteps in the leaf litter, the broken branches, the mud, were signs of a slow transition. The smoke penetrated through their increasingly excited and moist noses.

The wolves began to rub their bodies against each other, without taking their eyes off the fire. The ears had pricked up at the crackling, but seemed to be waiting for something. further. Perhaps from voices that would come from the flames, the earth or the air. Everything already appeared to be a single element, although momentarily converted into different forms, diverse manifestations of the same force springing from the ground.

Undefined figures began to be seen in the dense opacity of the smoke. The smell had stopped being nauseating, and was now almost sweet but still somewhat foul. The women felt it and tasted it.

The smell took the shape of the wolves' throats. Saliva fell from the corners of the animals' mouths and necks. They licked each other's sweet

scent of fur, and rubbed themselves in the mud. They needed to be covered in the smell of the ancient land.

The figures of the smoke were shaped like leaves moved by the wind. The heads of the wolves followed the movements of those shapes.

The smoke had the outlines of men.

The arms were raised, surrounding the young women, and they shook and cried. The shadows receded and rejoined the mass of smoke, but soon appeared again.

This time they were heads looking towards the faces of the wolves.

The animals had begun to tremble. Some ran from one side to the other, jumped, bit each other, but most of the males went to hug each other by the bonfire.

The women were holding hands again, their eyes bright and frightened.

The smoke was changing its movements. It was concentrated around the wolves. The animals backed away and squeezed in a little tighter. They tried to flee, they ran into the old women, but they couldn't escape, they knew it. They rolled in the dirt, moaned and howled. They looked towards the trees at the darkness from which they had come, and did not want to return.

But the smell of the meat of the offerings attracted them from the flames.

The old women restarted their litany when they saw the fear of the beasts.

-The earth returns the dead with the forms of air and wind. It becomes the aroma of the ancestors, the seeds of their souls preserved in the bodies of the living. You will shelter the spirits of the desperate, the exiles from the land of bodies. The body is the land of the soul. The body is the soul of the earth. Each one returns to the other and becomes confused. They will be refuges, until the Benefactor frees them.

The wolves paid attention to the women's voices. They had stopped trembling, their reddish backs were like fathoms that were extinguished in the ashes. Then they sat on their hind legs, and the leader began to howl and made the others lose fear. Everyone imitated him. The howls discordantly joined together into a shrill lament, which little by little took on a sad and painful tone. A song so sad that the figures in the smoke came closer to them, as if they recognized it.

The figures thinned out to the narrowness of a thread, a blade of straw. The wolves were still howling with their heads held high and their snouts pointed toward the dark sky. And the smoke entered through the wolves'

noses and their open mouths. It mixed with the air they inhaled to emit their song of sorrow, and they could no longer be anything other than a single substance, elements confused by the nature of the air converted into the liquid of the body.

Blood.

Little souls spinning through the body of the wolves. Voices transformed into howls that would be lost in the gaps of the night to re-emerge every night in each forest.

The animals crouched with their snouts against the ground and between their paws. They fell silent one after the other, and when the last howl died away, one of the old women began to speak.

-Go and give your message to everyone in the forests. The birds will travel far and carry the fountains of souls. Man's people will then live in the rest of the world until he can return to his land.

The young women looked at the sun that was rising on the horizon. The darkness weakened and the cold grew. They sank to the ground, exhausted. The old women returned the clothes that had been taken from them at midnight. Their hair was dirty, their faces were haggard, and the light of the day revealed the sad whiteness of their skin.

They walked weakly towards the exit of the forest. They knew that their parents were waiting for them with food and shelter. They were sad, but it was only anguish caused by fatigue. They knew that the body they now carried was not the same one with which they had left their homes.

The old women broke the circle and threw dirt on the remains of the bonfire. The smoke that came out was gray, and without any meaning. An ordinary substance, mere instruments of fire and wood.

The trees began to take in the morning light in their high branches, while the light began to descend into the leaf litter. All the leaves on the lower branches were withered. as or burned.

The wolves were gone. No one saw them flee or run to hide from the light of day.

Not even the fetid aroma of the dead remained.

Just the smell of wolves.

*

-There are things that are not memories, they are simply known. Sometimes I see myself as the last layer of snow on so many others that cover the winter land. I dig into my memory, I find vestiges of many past lives. I remember old events. Maybe it's just my imagination. But is it possible that I am more than what I see, that I deserve the reverential respect, the fear in the eyes of all of you, women, companions of misfortune and joy?

Gerda had one hand in those of the woman kneeling next to the cot. Through her hands, she transmitted heat to him, because Gerda was trembling. More than the fever that had invaded her three nights before, as intense as if summer had hidden in her head, she feared for the life of her son. She looked at her belly, shaken by chills and the child's kicks.

"Calm down," she murmured, caressing her tense skin, covered in sweat. They had put pieces of ice around her body. But every night the heat increased again, and it was no use bringing more snow or covering it in white.

The woman rubbed her arms and hands, then her face, her neck, her legs. Gerda felt better when they took out the ice and began to rub her like they did now, just like a sick girl.

-It's strange, but I don't remember my childhood, only the day I rescued Sigur. I have so much memory of things, images, pains of people I never met...

She looked at the woman listening to her.

- Could it be that the cold hinders my intelligence, as my husband says? Don't you know more about me than these doubts? I know I'm another. I am certain of ignorance. But today it is the heat of the cold that erases everything, disturbs everything.

The woman hugged her in her arms, against her chest. She was old enough to be her mother, but the delicate ways in which she treated her were another sign of her fearful respect, of the unbridgeable distance that existed between them.

They had sent for the town's healers two days before. It might take five days or more to arrive. The men were meanwhile making a path in the snow from the threshold of the cabin. The noise of the shovels, the snorts of the men as they stooped and stood up, were the only real accompaniment for Gerda. The women who lived near her used to enter the hut one at a time, so as not to disturb her. The silence was opaque and deaf, enclosed by the snow that fell and accumulated on the roof. The gusts chilled her when the door opened, but she couldn't have endured the days without that short view of the outside. She saw the light of winter, the imperishable whiteness that traveled on the wind. Some black dots, in the middle of the snow,

moved like ants: the men worked, moving away from it, opening a path for the healers.

-Our men work day and night. They know what your husband is doing for them, what your son means. And that's why they dig and remove the snow. A path so that the evil that afflicts you moves away from your body. Your husband will return there to console you, and your son will go out to populate the world.

Gerda heard these words every morning, whispered in her ear by her old woman who had taken care of her the night before. It was only then that she fully woke up and she felt lucid, although exhausted by the night chills. Since she couldn't move, her body had concentrated on the memories.

In the afternoons, her companions dozed, and she, raising her head a little, observed through the cracks in the boards bowed by the weight of the snow. Thin trickles of water trickled to the ground, and large spots of melted snow marked the wood. Sometimes she heard the creaking of the eaves and the roof right above her.

The snow has buried me, and people walk without knowing of my presence.

The idea began to bother her. She shook the woman's shoulder until she woke up, and she wanted to force her to come out and look. The other tried to calm her down, telling her that they were just some birds that had started arriving the day before.

-When I came this morning, they were on the roof. There were five, it seems to me, when only yesterday there was one. The men told me that they are coming from all directions, and they land up here, without taking flight again. -And the woman looked at the ceiling for a while, listening to the footsteps.

Gerda then limited herself to listening to the continuous flapping of wings, the pecking on the wood. She imagined them side by side, covering the roof of the cabin surrounded by snow. Sometimes she heard the spread of wings taking flight, perhaps in search of food.

"What are they like?" she asked one afternoon. Although she somehow already knew it. In the mouths of others the indefinable memory of her would cease to be just a strange virtue ofyour imagination.

The two who accompanied her looked at each other, they sensed the uselessness of the answer, but they answered, willing to spend the time waiting.

-They are black. They have black feathers that do not reflect light. They are similar to deep wells when they stop flapping or moving. The men say

they are vultures. The priests say that they are the birds that return every hundred winters. We have never seen them before.

Gerda continued to pay attention to the footsteps, the squawks and the pecks. There must have been many, judging by those noises. Not even the screams of the men or the banging of the tools had managed to scare them away. They stayed there and the days passed. The anxiety of waiting grew with the number of birds.

She continued to fear for the solidity of the construction.

"I don't know if the wood can withstand the snow and the birds," she told the women, resting her tired head on the blankets. The fever did not leave her, and her eyes, almost red, blinked with tears that had begun to hurt her skin. Her old women dried her face and consoled her.

-The hut will hold.

-But my son...-she insisted, crying without knowing how to contain herself and ashamed that the others saw her like that, because something told her that it wasn't really her who was crying.-...he will be born in the middle of winter, isolated as we are, with his father so far away, and the home will collapse...

Desperation had erased the beauty of her face, and it was the same as that of so many other women in the region. Seeing her like this, the old women seemed to be less afraid, they touched her and spoke to her without her reservations or that distance that they had thought necessary to put first.

The nights passed, and the day of delivery approached. The fever subsided for a few days, Gerda felt stronger. The noise of the shovels had decreased, and could be heard from time to time.

-Tell the men not to stop digging for any reason.

"They won't do it," the woman answered as she heated the food. "They won't stop doing it until the healers arrive." But you'll be better...

-It doesn't matter. These days I have remembered that it was I who called them, not the healers of the town, but others, I don't know when, but I know the words I spoke...-she thought for a while.

The fever, however, always returned, but intermittently, and it plunged her into pits from which she woke up more tired and confused. Her son also moved in her womb and hit her.

A young woman suddenly entered, letting the cold wind hit the interior of the cabin. The old woman became angry and shook her granddaughter by her hair. The wind continued to chill the room.

"Shut it down!" Gerda ordered, and her loud voice didn't seem to come from her swollen, weak body. The other two stayed looking at her for a moment, and then went to close the door. The youngest, still agitated, asked permission to speak to her, while the grandmother looked at her suspiciously. Her granddaughter's eyes darted from one face to the other, seeking approval.

"Speak," said Gerda.

As she was about to begin, she coughed and the old woman patted her on the back, shaking her head with a challenge on her lips.

-The men have seen the birds on the road, half a day from here. They say they have landed on the snow. Neither the screams, nor the stones nor the threats with shovels made them flee. So they continued working. The birds seemed to be watching them. They are not afraid of birds, that's what they said, but I think so. If I had seen them, birds bigger than this... -And she opened her arms as much as she could.

-Go on…

-The birds were there until nightfall, without moving. The men left their work and walked away with the tools on their shoulders. They must have trembled as they turned to watch the birds, which followed them with their eyes. But the birds became gray spots in the gloom on the snow.

The grandmother had sat down, surprised by the unknown eloquence of her granddaughter. She had never heard her talk like that. The awkwardness of her arrival had turned into an almost mature fluidity of thought.

-My father was among them, and when he returned home he told us all this. His face was cold, not so much because of the frost, but because of fear. Her gaze was shining, and she didn't take her eyes off the road. After a while, he told us that he had seen the birds start to move. They did not take flight, but walked a little more upright, taller. She thought she saw them go down to the path they had made. But... -The young woman suddenly started crying, with her face in her hands and kneeling in front of the cot. The grandmother tried to separate her from Gerda, once again ashamed of her granddaughter.

"Let me finish talking," she said, and took the young woman's hands, cold and white.

-This morning, before dawn, my parents sent me to serve it with my grandmother. I left. My home is not too far from the road, so littleor it took me a while to arrive. I was hoping to see the birds, but I didn't find them. His paw prints have not yet been erased. But when I looked over the wall of snow that overlooks the path, I saw them. Oh, Lady!

"To the birds?" Gerda asked.

-No! To the women, to the witches! -The young woman covered her face once again. Her grandmother turned away from her, and looked toward the windswept door.

-They were so horrible, so horrible! And they looked at me! I saw their eyes, and they weren't eyes! I'm stained, Lady!

Gerda did not have time to tell the old woman to comfort her granddaughter. The door had opened with the force of a gust, but there was nothing on the long, straight path that led before the hut from the indefinite depths of the snowy horizon. Nothing but the howling of the wind could be heard above the young woman's crying. The old woman had not moved from her place. The fluttering of the birds on the ceiling had stopped, but she could feel them on the ceiling, as if they were the ones holding the structure up.

Then, still barely perceptible, a dark spot began to be seen at the end of the path, which slowly increased in size. It had a rhythmic movement, like the swaying of a woman rocking a child. That was the first thing Gerda thought.

-She is one of the women of the town... -she said smiling at the two who accompanied her. But soon her smile faded when she saw that several other silhouettes were differentiating themselves from the previous one, perhaps being born from it. They were far away, but the white stripes of snow could be seen separating the bodies of those arriving.

"Finally..." she said this time, knowing that they would have everything better than the women of the village. However, the young woman's fear touched her like a cold hand on her belly warmed by her blankets. She didn't know them, at least she didn't remember them, and like so many other times, she had the feeling that they were familiar. But then the mere idea of thinking about them also began to be pleasant, it made her feel sheltered.

She looked carefully again. They were already halfway there. There were six women walking in two lines. Each one, despite their extreme similarity in clothing, was acquiring individuality as they approached. It was still difficult to make out the faces behind the wind dirty with leaves and snow. She saw the black dresses that covered them, the dark blankets over her head, and the thin white dots of her hands gathered in front of her neck to prevent the wind from snatching them away.

Shortly after, she heard the sound of leather soles on the packed snow in front of the entrance. The first two occupied the entire space of the threshold. The light behind her shadowed the faces hidden by the hoods. Gerda did not dare to speak to them. From her bunk she bowed with her right hand.

A weak white hand, covered with brown spots and thickened knuckles, emerged from under the dress of one of the newcomers, and she bowed with a similar bow. She then leaned on the wall to give herself momentum, and the scraping of the wood against something hard like nails was heard. Another imitated her, and both took the first step that put them definitively away from the snow, on the warm floorboards of the cabin.

When the six entered, the last one closed the door, and the rest stood around it. Their clothes were threadbare, and white hair was sticking out from the edges of the cloths they used to cover their heads. In the hands in front of the chest, the bones stood out under the skin. Their faces were dry, covered in furrows and folds. The noses were long and curved, the lips very thin, so much so that they almost seemed to lack them. High cheekbones ended in a sharp chin. The eyebrows were white, but there was darkness where the eyes should be. All Gerda could make out was the ocher pallor of her eyelids. Maybe they had never had eyes, and had walked the road blindly, she told herself.

-Should I remember? -She asked. -The fever hides things from me.

She didn't know whether to wait for a response. She did not consider it possible that any voice could be born from witches. But one of them answered him, barely opening her lips. The wrinkles on her neck moved a little as she spoke. The voice had the sound of rustling scales. But a smell of old, stagnant earth had come from the old woman's mouth.

-Don't be surprised that you don't know, because later you will remember.

Under the defeated roof of the hut, a brief echo resounded, although only that sound of scraping scales persisted. Then another of the witches spoke. This time the noise and the smell were like feathers moved by a cold wind, and the birds on the roof fluttered their wings.

-Do not be surprised that you suffer as a woman, because you will give life to the son of a man.

The voice of the third was dry, cutting, stripped away like another form of emptiness without complaints.

"We'll take care of it," she said to those who had been taking care of her. I go to Gerda. She reached out from under her dress and began to peel off her hood.

The grandmother and granddaughter covered their eyes, then turned and opened the door, fleeing the cabin, without turning to look.

The witch's hair fluttered a little, but it was tied at the nape of her neck in a braid. The back of her skull was elongated, as if it had been compressed from the sides at birth. Her ears were a little higher than eye level, thin and

almost transparent. The broad forehead had a slimy appearance, covered with sweat. The witch ran the back of her hand over her face.

-Only for you, my Lady, we have come from our lands. It has been centuries since we have been entrusted with a task like this.

-Take care of her, Lady of Great Wisdom.

-Treat her like a daughter, you, our Mother and Master of the spells that govern the world.

The others, except one who remained silent, continued the litany. They began to distribute the tasks. One closed the entrance again, while others fed the fire with wood. They melted ice in a fountain to heat water. None, even the one who had taken off her hood, opened her eyelids.

Gerda began to feel the familiar touch of memories of her coming from the dark region of her memory. A smell of everyday life lulled her to sleep as she watched them work blindly. She let herself be touched by the hand of the oldest of the six, while she changed her dirty clothes that stank of sweat and old snow.

The witches threw the fabrics, vessels and cloths with oils into the fire. The flames warmed the frozen air that entered through the cracks. One carried firewood from a dark corner where the stock of wood never seemed to run out. Log by log, all the rest of that day and night, he fed the fire.

Those who prepared the fountain had divided the tasks. One brought fragments of ice leaked from the ceiling, the other stirred the water with the freshly poured ice. They only stopped when the old woman comforting Gerda raised a hand. Then they took out the bags hidden under their clothes, untied the knots, and poured the contents into the water. One after another, even the oldest, passed by the fountain to dump the gray dust, which when it fell left a dirty halo floating in the air.

Gerda smelled the ash and the irritation of her throat with the dust that swirled inside the cabin. She coughed, and the labor pains began. Spasms that barely gave him time to recover before the next one. They were no longer small kicks, but the feeling of the body twisted and stretched, over and over again. Something that broke and tore with every spasm. But she still couldn't see what she had hoped would be revealed to her. Her pain plunged her into a dark world where her senses functioned precariously. She only saw the witches, attentive to her screams. She felt the hands of the old women holding her arms, she smelled the aroma of the ashes in the water with a stench that drowned her, as if the bodies of the dead were cooked in the water, or the ice was forming again, enclosing the ash. A form of persistence and eternity.

"The dead survive their death," said one of the old women.

Gerda thought that the dead came to ask her for favors, to let them use her as an instrument of survival.

The old woman had clung to her right arm, and her forehead resting on her cot was praying a new litany.

-The dead come, they are in water and ice, in fire and ash. They are looking for you, Master.- Then she looked up at the bonfire, ordering more ice and fire. The others hurried to comply, and the water transformed into steam and smoke whose ashes descended again.

Ella Gerda felt that the drops of steam fell on her skin and turned into stains with the smell of the earth. She found herself covered in small open pits in her skin. The smoke rose, she abandoned the ashes around her and returned outside through the spaces between the boards of the roof, to become snow again and then ice torn away by the tireless hands of the witches.

But her pain worried her more than the dirt on her skin. Something definitively broke inside her, and the water flowed as if she had drank all that ice that was melting and reforming without stopping. The water wet the bunk and fell to the floor, and ashes also fell into the puddle that became the mud where the witches immersed their hands and rubbed their faces desperately.

-The liquid of the vital body that nourished your son! The liquid filtered from your blood. "The water that is drunk from the ashes of the dead," they recited.

Gerda couldn't speak. She was very tired, and her child was not yet born. But she no longer needed to say anything, her forgetfulness had been torn apart and she began to see what had always been within reach of her maus.

the birth of my lineage in the creation of the world, in a place in the heavens, the meekness of those who inhabited it, until the formless beings came to claim their preeminence, they remembered life, and missed its domain, they could not leave to remember, memory was food for anger, they said they were before us because nothingness begins before life

The dead return from where they have come, not from life, but from death before life, nothingness exists in the nothingness of the after, they are before the witches who call them, before the gods who create things, because The dead are the nothingness with which the gods create the world, the earth is made with the elements of that nothingness, the earth is death, it is made up of the dead, and when they return, the memory of nothingness is concretized in anguish, despair, resentment that is not contained because it does not have fixed contours, the earth cannot be contained, it clumps together, dries up and floats with the wind that agitates the substances, the dust that travels and creates the stars

and the dead do not tolerate the absence of things, it is their substance, but they cannot bear that earth in their throats filled with memories, it suffocates them, because memory cannot get rid of itself, the dead are that nothing touched, beaten, molded for a moment with that something that makes men see the color of the sun in men's eyes, the body leaves a mark that they cannot forget, the flesh is pain, the bone is pain, and the pain it leaves is bitter, but each one knows that it is the sign of individuality, and the failure of the body the common background of humanity

nothingness misses the body, and the pain of the body brings nothing but pain transformed into anger, the knowledge of one's own body creates a memory, and the memory is flesh too, it is one more bone in the skeleton of the world, fragment, splinter, speck of dust that hurts and drowns the memory of the living

gods or witches only exist at the expense of the dead, and the beings they protect are enemies of the bodies that remain, there are not many bones built, those formed by the counted elements of the world, one day they will end, they know it , and the bodies must be renewed, then they will return, but there will be battles to regain possession of those bodies, those flimsy worlds of flesh and fragile bones that even a leaf can hurt, bodies desired as we miss a hand that is no longer on our arm , sad lost member who returned to earth and awaits his return

that we would follow their path, and sooner or later we would also be them, claiming in the middle of nowhere the domains of the living, missing is everything, it is being and not existing, we take the side of the good dead, those who were deprived of their lands first and then their bodies and we take them to inhabit the flesh of animals, we protect them, the good dead are those who instead of fury feel a desire for vindication, we choose them, those who desire revenge and look with dry eyes to the dead of the history of the world, so tired of their death, that they are no longer more than beings with an indefinite form, although similar to the contours of hatred, the precise limits that lead to darkness

Not being is being, and the battles to retain the virtues of life began, the mysteries dusted by oblivion in the minds of the witches were unearthed, they, the ones who play with the virtues of death at the expense of men, these instruments of the vanity of old women who hide their beauty behind the gestures and words that speak of eternity, to convert the dispossession of the earth into something more useful than humiliation, the struggle to overcome the forms of death with so many other forms of life descended into the domains of men, because men are children who do not remember anything and play with bones as if they were elements that had no end, and play with flesh as if it were never capable of becoming rotten, the Men laugh when they are children, they cry when they see the end of time in the sky and the rain of dust on their heads, they contemplate in surprise the cracks in the flesh and the fragility of their skull in front of the nails of the dead.

and at that moment when the fight must gain strength, the old people know that behind it is death and the return to non-sensation, and that scares them, they capitulate with the dead who visit them at night, they join their forces to reserve themselves. a space in the fight, because each warrior will recover a body, with the inevitable hope, the enormous faith that grows every spring in the trade winds of no time, like a tree that grows tall and wide, encompassing the forest, consuming the hope of the other trees to grow, the faith that lives eating the desire of others, the vital hope that the day they triumph, the recovered body will be their old and endearing body

-Men die when they believecen... -the old woman said to no one in particular, just reciting an ancient prayer-...they become strong, they have left their souls in the wombs of their mothers, of their young wives, and when they are mature men, they fight with bodies without souls, because they only have bodies to lose. Perhaps you haven't seen how they look at their reflection in the water of a well or a river every morning, how they prepare and dress for the fight. They are bodies that the dead claim, that look at those wells from the bottom with envy, and men barely see some black dots like stones on the river bed. Domains of the dead! We will all dance in the circular dance of life. You, making yourself heard by men as if you were gods. Us, demanding a return to life with spells and traps. They have left that to us. Appearances. Oh, you! The real shadows of stone, spirits that hit harder than a hundred mountains, that speak the language of the rock, more eternal than our gray hair docile to the wind, that wind even more eternal because it is uncatchable and devours rocks. In the circle we will fall during our fights, a hundred times and then thousands of times another hundred for the rest of the time. A time longer lasting than the wind itself, because it is born with nothingness. In dance we will celebrate life in turns, moments that may last centuries, but in the end something will run out, without remedy.

The witch's voice was interrupted by a high-pitched scream dominated by crying. The birds on the roof squawked in response, the screeches surrounding the cabin and the birds flapping their wings. Some took flight and came crashing back into the walls. The structure shook. One of the witches looked through the cracks.

"It's getting dark, and there is no moon," she said. "The birds will fly with us and your son."

The smell of feathers prevailed over the aroma of ashes. The noise of the flapping wings did not stop. Gerda was dizzy. She heard the birds flying around the cabin, faster and faster, and she sank into a vertigo that transported her and held her in the air.

The witches screamed with a screech like the birds, except the sixth old woman, who had never spoken. She was the only one who remained calm. She approached Gerda with her arms outstretched and her hands open. He

grabbed her ankles and made her bend her legs. She ordered, with a movement of her hand, that they bring water. Then she soaked a cloth in the thick, warm liquid, which now had the softness of feathers.

Gerda looked at the ceiling, and she felt how the old woman was cleaning her, and she began to relax, until she almost didn't suffer while her sex was dilating.

The son moved towards the light.

She saw what he saw: the circle open to the world of witches and snow.

The world of wood and fire, of birds creating a wind of feathers that crossed the walls and made the boards tremble. The snow came in, clouding the air. The fire stirred, without going out.

The sixth witch took the child's head in her hands.

The phalanges formed small pits in his skull. She molded her hands to the silhouette of the creature, and she dragged it out.

The boy began to cry, but the crying was more like that of a sad old man than that of a child.

Gerda gave one last cry of pain, but her son was already outside of her forever, in the arms of the witch, who this time looked up at Gerda, took off her hood and opened her eyelids.

Her eyes were his, her face and hair his.

The others did the same, and looked at her. They all had the shapes of faces she had once had.

They began to murmur a song that was confused with the flapping of the birds' wings and their squawks.

The ceiling boards collapsed and broke. A large hole opened through which icy gusts entered, shaking the women's clothes and the blankets on the cot. A swirl of black feathers preceded the birds' entry.

Gerda was no longer her. Her legs had turned into clawed paws, her arms into wings that spread out. Her face had lengthened and a curved beak had grown over her mouth. Then she began to fly, and the other witches followed her as her bodies took the shape of vultures.

Hundreds of black birds crossed the sky. The path cleared by the men had been covered with snow again. The walls of the hut that were still standing were full of scratches, and there was no roof anymore.

The people of the village came out of their houses to see the column of birds that emerged from the destroyed cabin, and that continued to emerge

even when almost the entire sky was already covered with birds. There seemed to be an endless nest deep in the earth beneath that cabin.

The women knelt in front of the cabin, some praying, others too scared to even move. But three of them dared to enter. The last birds continued to be born from thes walls and what remained of the structure threatened to collapse. And they found the child protected between the blankets.

The villagers approached and covered him with their bodies to protect him from the flapping of the birds that were born from under the cot. They left before the walls fell definitively, but they only had eyes for the long lines of birds flying towards the South. They covered themselves with their hands from the strange reflection of the moon, which disappeared and re-emerged between the wide wings of the birds.

The men surrounded their women to see the child, and together they took the road to the village, but without stopping to look up from time to time.

The birds continued to emerge throughout the night and into the next day, until the last one was lost to sight in the thick fog and black clouds of a storm that had begun to form, covering the horizon.

*

It was the third storm in thirty days, and the last winter had been the harshest of the four they had been traveling. He had managed to gather almost a thousand people since he left the village, but the winter had taken more than a hundred of women and children. The men were still resisting, but they were exhausted and many had stayed in the towns they passed through.

A mass of black clouds were advancing from the north. They formed and broke with the wind, which also forced them to protect their faces and hunch their backs to move forward. The clouds were swirling and moving toward them that afternoon, lightning appearing from time to time. A dense fog had begun to form in the distance, and the rain was falling hard and thick. He would arrive at the latest at dusk at the hill where they had settled. But the fog and darkness continued to advance and the storm clouds rotated as if on an axis.

Sigur was worried. He had never seen anything like it. Northern storms were not announced that way.

"Look," he said to his men, who knew that country better than many others in the group. Sigur had organized them according to the experience and skills they demonstrated during the trip. Some were relieved when the

lands were already less known to them. But it had been a long time since he had managed to replace them.

"What do you think, Tarkus?" he asked.

The man looked at his companions, scratched his gray beard, then blinked at the silver reflection of the sun through the clouds. He had a weathered face, with green eyes that stood out against his gray hair.

-You know I'm not afraid of anything, Sigur, but I do owe respect to that. He is two days away from us, and he is advancing directly here. - He turned towards the plain, where the caravans and people were resting.

The central column, where the principals traveled with their families, had been located in the inner circle to protect themselves from possible attacks. The right column was finishing accommodating itself in a circle peripheral to the previous one. They were also in charge of safeguarding food and supplies, and taking care of children who had lost their parents. The last column had just begun to settle, and it would take most of the day to set up the protective fences. The logs were transported by oxen that needed to rest and eat. The women were in charge of setting up the tents, the men of preparing the fire. The screams of the stragglers mixed with the whips and the dust. There were still fifty strong animals carrying timbers and boards thundering over the stony ground and mounds of snow. The children ran through the smoke of the first bonfires and the disturbed earth. The smell of the beasts rose like a fresh vapor in the wind that whipped the plain.

Sigur and his men watched from the hill the confused and continuous flow of people. The spiral was forming slowly, painfully under the threat of the sky.

"They are also afraid," said one. "You can see it in how they behave, even if there are no protests."

"The animals have sensed the storm for several days before, that's why it's hard to control them," said Motz the hunter, whom Sigur had brought from his village.

"It won't do us any good to stay here, the storm is going to devastate us." Tarkus did not look at his boss when he spoke, but rather towards the dark horizon.

Sigur looked at the regions around him. The storm extended from the north, almost touching the western borders and mountains. To the east, the steppe opened up without protection, perhaps also without food or water. The few who had gone there returned talking about sharp rocks among poisonous grasses, about vermin that came out of their burrows to bite the feet of those who dared to pass by. But above all very cold, too much to be endured without food. Then he looked south, the goal that had guided him

for four winters, and from which he was still not sure how far it was. However, it wasthe only way left for them.

He pointed to the plateau in the southwest.

-Do you see that reflection in the sky, clear as a lake after the rain?

The others looked on, making shadows with their hands on their foreheads. They murmured words of doubt.

"Where?" They asked, but Tarkus had already seen what his boss was pointing out.

-The sea.

Sigur smiled.

-That's how it is. I've been through it, and I could never forget what it looks like. It is very far away, but closer is the Northern Village, a prosperous fishing and merchant town.

"How far away?" asked another, already disillusioned with the possibility of fleeing, but no one answered.

Sigur knew that there would be no time to reach the village before being hit by the storm. He sat in the snow, head down. The wind hit her face with her own long red hair, with flakes of dirty snow. The men circled around him, hands behind their backs. Some thinking, others with their eyes set on the town that continued to settle.

One of those driving the caravan was going up the hill. When he reached them, he stopped to rest and they surrounded him asking him questions. He ignored them and spoke to Sigur.

-Sir, some children have seen men painted white, to the south. They say they did not see them carry weapons. I think they are lookouts, Sir. I fear that they will soon attack us.

-They must be from the tribe we defeated ten nights ago. "They spread like ants, faster than we move," said another of the men.

-We should have exterminated them all, now we will always have them ahead.

They were waiting for a response from Sigur.

"So close to the sea, so close, and this happens to us," he said, sadly. It was a comment made as if he had used the voice of the wind to say it. Hollow, harsh, and with its air of undoubted certainty, it was almost a sharp edge to those listening. Then he took a deep breath and stood up again.

-Arrange an expedition. For now we will defend ourselves as we can. - He paused, looking towards the caravans. - We are going to stay, it is better that the storm finds us established on this ground than that it surprises us on the road.

The others nodded.

"If the gods help us, perhaps the storm will change course," said Tarkus. "It wouldn't be the first time."

But Sigur rested his stump on the shoulder of his friend.

-Don't expect too much from the gods. We have never seen them avoid tragedies.

They walked down the hill toward the great spiral that sat above the snow-covered valley. The wind had increased, making it difficult to install the fences.

Orders and protests carried by gusts that smelled like rain could be heard on either side of the caravan, which was uncoiling like a snake, gentle as a snail. The snorts of the beasts, the screams urging them to advance, the clash of the beams and the voices of those passing ropes along endless rows of tired men. The work did not decrease throughout the day. Only the children sat up and fell asleep on their blankets separated from the snow by straw. When night came, the pillars had not yet finished being placed.

Sigur watched them from the tent on the hill. The spiral of the caravan was forming slowly, but at the pace they were going they could be ready before the storm found them. The center of the wooden snail was almost assembled, but he didn't want to go check it yet. From the hill it was easier for him to see his people, and he knew that they would eventually have to realize that he was not hiding, but that he was taking responsibility for the trip.

A group would come to see him that night, so he had been told. They were discontented by the loss of life during those four winters. The germ of disorder could be clearly felt every time someone looked him in the eye. They had never dared, however, to refuse an order, or even to delay in carrying it out. There were no looks of resentment either, just an anguish drawn in the gestures of the younger ones. A kind of submissive distrust that hurt him more than rebellion.

Campfires marked the contours of the spiral in the valley. Some shadows moved around quickly, others slowly. Sigur couldn't see them, but he knew they were the men changing shifts for work. The shadows that rose went back to the periphery of the spiral, those that sat would sleep to rise again before dawn.

Sigur saw the torches ascending the slope in the hands of four or five men. They were panting, and sweat glistened in the distance. He came forward to receive them. They lowered their gaze when they met him, and bowed briefly.

-Get closer to the fire.

They obeyed and left their torches by the campfire. They sat around, and Sigur invited them to drink from a vessel which they passed from one to another, without speaking. PairThey were waiting for him to do it first. One of Sigur's assistants wanted to ease the tense calm.

"We're all tired," he murmured. "They should talk now to rest later."

The men of the town looked at him as if they were a flatterer. Then they spoke to Sigur.

-We have followed him all this time, despite the storms and attacks, despite the loved ones we lost and buried, because we knew that all this could happen when we left our towns. He has not lied to us, Lord, we know it, and we have been faithful to him. But this time hopelessness overcomes us. The northern sky is approaching. The dirt and snow have risen and will fall on us. The enemies, the savages or the other peoples that we may encounter no longer matter. We want to know if we are free now.

-Free to escape? Where? -said Sigur.- Whatever they thought, I thought about it before. The solution is not to flee, because there is no time. We must stay and be like rocks, stones with roots to the depths. Only then will the winds not carry us away.

He got up, stoked the campfire, and observed the silence on the men's faces.

"Free for what?" He repeated, without anger, but with disappointment. "They are here because they have chosen." Look at the town, your women are waiting for you. They built the spiral with you because they wanted it that way. If I told you that you were free, where would you go?

Sigur advanced towards the one who had spoken, made him stand and face him.

-Men, don't you realize it yet?! Without you, I can't do anything. Ask yourselves then, who is the one who is free?

The moon was an opaque snowball, small, deformed by the clouds, peeking out behind the hill, which would not rise any higher that night.

The man rested a hand on Sigur's left arm. The others looked at him in amazement at his confidence. Sigur did not move or withdraw his arm. The man then approached his face, and left a kiss on his leader's cheek. Then he walked away, without looking back, and the others followed him.

The assistants surrounded Sigur, and commented on his daring. He didn't listen to them, only one word was repeated in his head without being able to get it out of his mind. That man had said something to him as he approached. One word, only. For no apparent reason. But Sigur felt tied again to a human bond. Shaped by more than the company of other beings marked like him. After a long time, for that single moment, he did not need to think or make an effort to extend the hand that he did not have. Someone else had brought him back to the race of common men, to the age of children and to the state of peace.

And the voice was erased in that restless night without rest, dominated by the blows on the wood, the cries of the babies who woke up, and by the wind, which became stronger and stronger.

Sigur had ignored his assistants' pleas for him to rest. He saw them resign themselves to not being able to convince him, and they went to bed. He was awake all night. He wasn't sleepy. He thought about his family, and memories of him mixed with the families that followed him. So many times he had observed them working, feeding, living together between fights and misfortunes, between caresses, that he no longer knew if his own memories were true or just imagination. He began to worry about the lives of those who followed him. He looked at the first clouds of the storm that expanded the contours of the sky, like a mountain deformed by the wind, always immense, heavy like a great beast born at the ends of the world. Then he was surprised to feel his lips tremble and his eyes fill with water.

People rested in the early morning hours. Only the animals chewed their cud, and the pillars of the fences seemed to sleep like the men who rested on them. The wind continued blowing the same as all those last days, but the town continued sleeping with the echo of the wind in their ears, their hair swaying, their faces submissive to the icy gusts and the snowy water.

The wind rushed around him, encompassing the shape of his body, and somehow inhabited him as well. If the wind had stopped for a single moment, he would have felt lost, and the mere idea of thinking about that distressed him.

He no longer felt strong. He was nothing more than a piece of wood torn from the forests, molded and nailed to the hill, solely to resist the wind. And if there had been no wind, then...

He would resist that idea in every way possible. Any element in the world could disappear, except the wind.

The sun had not risen yet, but its light flooded the valley, the spiral of the town waking up, the ruminating of the goats, the barking of the dogs,

and the first voices of sleepy men. The black band of the storm and its circles of clouds that descended like an opening flower remained far away, day and night. edio away, perhaps.

His men were beginning to get up, but he did not dare to move. They would notice his weakness if he spoke to them with that fearful child's voice reflecting his panicked thoughts. Sigur's clothes were wet with cold sweat, and he began to shake. His back felt wet, a shiver ran down his legs. Then he realized that the wind had stopped, and that was why he was sweating. As if a heavy mass of heat was compressing him, or enormous hands were falling from the sky to extract the liquid of life from him.

And he would be left empty. He was already running out of thoughts and ideas. Only dread was something concrete, to which he could still hold his sanity. But the fear lost its forms and grew, until it encompassed the world without limits, without references to which to cling. An impenetrable sphere of fear with no exit. Inside and outside at the same time. Surrounding him like a circle of definitive nonconformity.

Sigur covered his face with his hands.

-No!

The men approached, but he got up and pushed them off to run down the hill. Some of the people were pointing at him without knowing who he was, others had stopped in the middle of the climb to watch the man running down. The helpers ran after Sigur to prevent him from getting so close to the others that they would recognize him. But it was too late for that.

"The great Lord has gone mad" was the first comment that was repeated under the shadow of the early storm clouds, now still and expectant over the valley. The children returned to the caravan and told what they had seen. Then expressions of despair appeared on the faces of the women and the old men. They gathered in groups and discussed what was happening. The men ran towards the hill.

They had managed to stop him, but Sigur was screaming with his gaze fixed on the sky, his face twisted by fury and restlessness. They held his arms, but he moved so much and his strength was so great that five were not enough to calm him down, or even to stop the momentum of the agitated legs that were throwing blows at everyone who was near him. His red hair looked dark and wet, his beard stank with the smell of saliva and perspiration. He seemed to be burning inside.

Tarkus had to take command.

-Go find three more trustworthy men. Motz, call your guards to move the people away. Tell them that Sigur is sick, but that he will soon be cured.

Then the others began to drag him back to the top. He was struggling to break away. He tore the fabrics, and his torso full of freckles, with small specks of red hair, shook in the arms of those who could no longer hold him. His screams stunned them. The absence of the wind was now more evident, as if they had seen it embodied in his leader, like an entity that had invaded him.

The void of the wind used Sigur's viscera, his skin and his voice to manifest itself again. The wind, which could no longer be wind, but emptiness, looked for ways to take refuge. His body was a whirlpool sweeping the town without respite or rest after the wild calm, the strange, empty calm before the storm.

Tarkus hit him. Sigur's head remained confused for a while, bobbing with his eyes closed. He was murmuring something between his bloody lips. The others looked at Tarkus, but said nothing to him. Sigur had given up his resistance, and they managed to carry him to the tent. When they put him to bed, he began to shake again. First his legs, then his arms. His teeth were chattering, and his neck had clenched and tightened. He was still sweating. They saw that he had burning sensations all over his body and they sent for some women from the town to prepare the healing spice bath.

Tarkus and an old man stripped him naked. While one rubbed his back and chest, the other rubbed his thighs and legs. They raised his arms above his head, because they said that this way the blood would return to the body more quickly.

Sigur's face was pale, his eyes half-closed, his mouth open with drops of saliva falling down his chin. Slowly, the tremors subsided. The women had arrived and were finishing the preparation of the bath in the jar. They were two old women who did not even look at Sigur as they watched the liquid change as they threw seeds and leaves. A smell of chestnuts spread in the air.

"It's ready," said one of them.

It was after noon, but the sun could not be seen behind the thick gray clouds. A group of muleteers waited outside the store, trying to hear news. The rest of the town continued setting up the palisades in the valley. The storm approached silently, without wind or thunder. Only lightning and the scent of rain, which however had not yet arrived.

"Back off," Tarkus said to the women.

They picked up Sigur and left him in the jar. The armsThey hung from the edges, his head swayed. Tarkus rubbed his shoulders and face again with the cloth soaked in the spice water.

"It's the pain of the wind," said one of the old women from the entrance. -It will last a whole day. Tomorrow, he will be as if nothing had happened to

him, or he will lose his mind forever.-Then she went out together with her companion, both immune to the gazes of men.

"It is true," said the old hunter. "I have heard of this evil in the Northern Village." People go crazy, they throw themselves from the rocks into the sea, so as not to feel the emptiness of the wind. That's what they said, but I never believed it.

"But the wind is nothing," said Tarkus, continuing to rub Sigur's skin.

-The wind is everything while it is, and the absence of all things when it disappears. He can't replace it, and it leaves the sensation of many fingers pressing into his face. Soon the sensation is lost, and a heat replaces it.

The old man sat next to Sigur, who was now delirious in a whisper.

-The residents say that they are like giant hands formed by insects that cling to everything that gets in their way. The wind is always stronger and tears away everything in its path. When he stops, his hands remain attached to us, and then they begin to penetrate the skin. They are dead fingers, they are like the void in an airless throat.

He looked back at Sigur, and stroked his head like a son.

Sigur was delirious that entire afternoon. They had left two assistants to take care of him, because Tarkus and the other chiefs had to suppress a revolt in the town. Many messengers had seen men painted white in the snow, watching over them, and people feared an attack.

The two women were called again before nightfall, and they made new preparations to bathe Sigur's head each time the burning grew. At night, the fever had subsided, and he slept. They covered him with blankets up to his neck. The fire crackled loudly, isolating it from the shouts with which outside, in the valley, the groups were getting ready to leave on an expedition.

Tarkus had ordered weapons and shields to be prepared, and formed a small army that awaited his orders.

-If we don't return by tomorrow, stay in the valley. They won't attack us in the storm.

They prepared the sleighs with few provisions. The dogs barked for a long time before leaving. From time to time they turned their heads towards the hill, and howled.

It was so dark that the sky looked like a well, with only the horizon line to the south like a white halo illuminating that part of the earth. The clouds had whitish and purple outlines, orange tones that soon faded and lost their

shapes, merging into a single mass of gray and black towards the north. A cold air had appeared without anything bringing it, neither wind nor breeze.

The sleds advanced, moving away with their spears at their sides, like tridents for possible enemies that appeared on the flanks. All night they traveled in the darkness, guided by the thin white line to the south. The dogs remained silent, only the rubbing of the leather ties and the panting could be heard. The men could not see each other, sometimes only the brightness of their eyes in the darkness, but always surpassed by the eyes of the dogs.

Tarkus wanted the sleds to travel a considerable distance apart. If they were attacked, the rest could come to their aid or return to give warning and seek reinforcements. They traveled attentive to the sound of footsteps in the snow, the rolling of stones or the moans of animals. He whistled, and everyone stopped.

"Listen," he said.

They couldn't see each other, but they guessed the restless attention gaze of his boss. The darkness was like a monster that they did not want to observe, because the silence made it more fearsome. Soon a very distant and serious sound came from an imprecise direction. The dogs were shaking. One of the men went down to pet them, but the animals retreated. They didn't seem angry, but scared.

The noise grew. It was a muffled roar that traveled beneath the snow, approaching more or less quickly by the moment. Sometimes it seemed to stop and slow down, as if it were moving away, but then it continued to get closer. The dogs jumped and pulled on their reins. The fear came from the south, but they couldn't see yet, and they turned to look north.

"We will not return," Torkus told them, guessing his intention. "There is no time to flee from the storm or whatever threatens us in the south."

The men murmured, running was heard in the snow, and then thumping and gasping. Then they stopped and their tired breathing was the only familiar sound that night.

Between two possible deaths, they chose to wait. There were no leaders or guides to lead them to better places. The only one they trusted blindly was lying sick. harsh and without sanity. They waited in the dark. They did not light a single torch. They waited, like snowmen, or like simple pieces of wood on the cold plain, ready to be swept away and let themselves go.

The dawn was almost indistinguishable from the night. The old women entered Sigur's shop. He was face up, and when he felt the gust, he opened his eyes. One of his men approached him, but the

They had gone ahead and spoke to him affectionately.

"Son," they said. "Do you remember what your name and your mother's name are?"

Sigur looked around. He felt rested, as if this were the first morning after many nights of sleeping.

-I don't know why you ask me, but I'm going to answer these old women. My name is Sigur, son of Tol and Sulla, and grandson of Zor the hunter.

The old women could not avoid tears of joy, and they squeezed the young man's arm with their weak fingers.

"We have recovered it," one said to the other.

He wanted to get up, but the men asked him to continue resting. They told him the situation of the town.

-The palisades are almost ready, but people are afraid. Tarkus went out in search of enemies yesterday, and he has not returned. He ordered us to stay and stick together.

-And the storm?

The old women intervened.

-You must see what happens in heaven, young Lord, because it is something that concerns you.

The men looked at them angrily. They had stood with their backs to the light that came through the wind-blown fabric, looking like two columns of rock, indifferent to any severity or reprimand.

Sigur did not want to obey the misgivings of his assistants, and he stood up leaning on them. Only a sweat-dirty cloth covered him from the waist down. The women gave way to him.

There were no longer people waiting for him outside. Everyone was busy preparing for the storm. Only a few children without parents had sat all day and night at the foot of the hill to watch him leave.

Despite the opaque luminosity, he had to close his eyelids so as not to hurt his eyes. He rubbed his face, always leaning on the arms of his wife. At first he only saw spots deforming the landscape. Then the view became clearer and he saw what stretched around the hill.

The great spiral of the caravan was almost complete, only the tail of the largest circle preserved the irregular contours of the fences under construction. The bonfires gave off white smoke, rising to the sky covered with clouds so uniform that they looked like a single great dark mass, as if the night sky had persisted well into the morning, illuminated by something

emerging from some indefinite place. The snow was deposited on the other layers of snow, dirty by the beasts of burden that roamed freely without anyone paying attention to them. The sled dogs and goats were tied and were jumping around in fright. Some children still played among the circles of the spiral, and looked up at the sky when lightning or thunder interrupted them.

The old women raised their right hands in the same direction as the children: the northern sky.

-Here they come, young Sigur, they bring you a message.

He looked, straining to make out those little black dots against the gray background of the horizon. Something had changed in the light. It was lighter, not older, but simply whiter, as if the clouds were moving. Then he realized that the storm had arrived. They were those circles of wind that he had seen very far away before, and that now rotated, dragging clouds from all directions. The circles absorbed the highest clouds, and dispersed over the valley to rise again. The hum of the wind became a roar.

The black dots advanced rapidly. Their figures became clearly defined. They were birds, formed in ranks like an army, covering almost the entire sky. They had broad black wings, gray and curved beaks, and they emitted squawks that faded into the distance. But the storm did not affect them even if they flew below the clouds.

A smell of feathers came from everywhere. Some fell around Sigur and his people, and the old women picked them up. He took one and stroked it. It was like touching Gerda's skin after a long time. He felt his newly regained strength in her break again.

-Cry, my Lord. "Don't be ashamed," said one of the women.

He stepped away from them, standing on his own this time, and wiped his face. He looked at the sky again. The birds had formed a roof over the valley and the hill, flying in circles in the opposite direction to the spiral of the caravan. The wind seemed to be stronger than before. The clouds were moving with a speed they had never seen before, and the noise of the wind was more than deafening, it produced bone-piercing chills. The birds kept spinning, always spinning in countless turns eachfaster and faster, and the wind rose, passing between the wings and rising, until there was only a breeze with the aroma of earth on the hill and over the people.

The lightning continued, the thunder grew in intensity. The people could feel the smell and noise of the rain that had stopped in the barrier formed by the birds. The feathers of the wings and upper part glistened with the water, reflecting the sunlight in white beams on the land, but most of the rays that passed through the cracks of the stormy sky were lost among the black mass of the birds. .

Some birds began to fall.

Sigur walked between them. He touched the black feathers, stroked the heads, and closed the birds' eyelids. He picked one up, folded its wings, and held it to his chest. He returned to the old women and continued looking at the sky.

The birds were spinning even faster. The wind that tried to descend was expelled upward with a force that also dragged the clouds and rain from one side of the sky to the other. A new shower of feathers fell into the valley, and the children ran in search of them, jumping to catch them in the air. The mothers wanted to stop them, because they were afraid of the omens, but they were unable to prevent them from covering themselves with black feathers like wingless birds.

The children who had been waiting for him at the foot of the hill were also running after the feathers, gathering them in their fists, showing each other those black bouquets. Then one of them approached Sigur and offered him one. Sigur bent down, took the bouquet of feathers, and after staying for a while with his eyes closed, as if he were listening to something, he sighed deeply.

"My son is born," he said then, looking up at the sky again.

The old women looked at each other, pleased.

The men were still lost in contemplation of the storm.

Sigur, standing facing the valley, began to stroke the dead vulture against his bare torso, like a black spot on the red hair of his chest.

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They rode on the backs of tarpans. Attached to their manes, their bodies swayed gently. The horses' short necks were shedding, and their light beards reaching down to their muzzles swayed as they trotted.

Just before setting sail, Tol had been tasked with finding out the origin of the strange birds that came from the north and nested in the docks, the port buildings and the town. The ships were ready, the sky was clear, the men were rested. Everything was ready for the journey towards the Droinne region, and he thought about weapons. They had enough on the ships to kill an entire town.

"They are to defend us," he had told the judges when they were surprised by the amount they put on the boats.

"You had them built without our permission," they reproached him.

-These are new lands for you, but ones that I know. The people there are warriors.

The judges finally agreed to let him go. Then they continued carrying the instruments of war: spears of all shapes and sizes, bows and arrows, catapults, hundreds of daggers, leather and wooden shields, stones modeled as balls, torches and enormous quantities of straw, but above all it was the great number of logs which surprised everyone. He had invented several instruments that were still being tested, and Tol intended to assemble formations of more than thirty men hidden in heavy mobile fortifications. He was even willing to destroy ships if there was not enough wood, or if he could not have forests.

Where did I create all this from? I, so ignorant when I fled from the volcano, that I was not able to save my wife and my children. And now so skilled in the preparations for a war. It's age, maybe. My body ages and my mind opens its eyes to experience. Sad intelligence of revenge, which knows how to wait with the patience of a turtle, creating new worlds for the hands to kill and satisfy themselves. But once the hands are open, the eyes can no longer close, they cannot see things from another world other than that one. Sad tyranny of resentment, which offers some calm to its always dissatisfied victims. But resentment is an even more lasting wound than remorse, and it does not lead to submission and punishment, but to anger.

The birds began to nest on the roofs of the cabins, to settle on the docks, the trees next to the village roads. They tried to scare them away or kill them, but more always arrived every morning. They did not hurt anyone nor did they eat the remains that the fishermen left in the port. The judges feared that a great storm of snow and wind was approaching, and they commissioned Tol to undertake an overland expedition. He prepared the tarpans and provisions, ready to postpone the departure of the ships. But first he asked for information again.

"There are people further north," the chief lookout told him. "There are traces ofheavy sleds, but I don't think they carry many weapons. Be careful, Lord.

Tol was grateful for the warning, and the next day they left. After a day of travel, the twenty men rode undisturbed by the dark storm brewing in the evening sky.

-It has already broken out two days from here. I don't think there is any danger to the village, as long as it doesn't last too long.

-He will arrive weak, if he does. It will only be a three-day rain, at most.

That's how they talked. Tol listened to them, but they only noticed the affirmative movement of his head and the sound of babbling. They had known him for a long time, when he was one of them, although a little older and more astute in hunting, and with a past that he did not like to talk

about. He had heard his men tell each other stories as they traveled, stories of struggles, wars and injustices, of which his Tol had been a victim and for which he now demanded revenge. He would make a sullen nod with his head, a stern gesture with his arms, or a resounding shout of an order for them to be quiet. He had chosen them among the best in the town to train the others and increase the army, he had overcome the criticism of the Assembly during long summers of meetings and requests.

Tol looked ahead, where a shadow stained the white background of the snow illuminated by the faint light of dawn. The storm clouds, although still far away, moved like distorted remnants of a slowly cracking sky.

"Strange storm, look over there," said one.

In the north, the sky was moving, convulsing, as if destroying itself. But it did not fall, only a gray rain beat over the distant land. Some birds flew above them, squawking with anguished cries. Tol followed the flight of the birds, until they disappeared towards the south. Then, he turned his attention to the spot in the snow.

-There is something ahead, I think they are sleds.

"Animals feel something," said another of the men, stroking his horse, which was snorting and shaking its head.

Tol already knew it. His white-breasted, black-legged tarpan had been restless long before. Now the grayish shadow took on precise and different tones, moving within that indefinite mass in the fog.

Then the dogs started barking.

-The watchers were right. They are an organized people, and they have sent a group to explore. But why have they stopped?

Tol could not understand them. If they had stopped since the middle of last night, they would have caught up with them by now. Maybe something serious had happened to them: wounded men, broken sleds, sick dogs. None of these causes seemed to him sufficient to detain an entire group at once.

"The dogs and horses tremble," Tol said, as if his thoughts had finally reached a conclusion. "I'm sure those men up ahead are afraid of us."

-Better this way.

The men had begun to talk in the shadows with only the dull glow of the snow outlining the figures of the riders and horses.

-Some merchants said that the caravan recruited people from town to town during the last four winters. They are guided by a man accompanied by black birds.

"That explains the birds," said another.

"But all that is gossip from travelers and women," said Tol, who disdained those beliefs and superstitions of his men. "It is impossible for vultures to come from such cold regions."

And yet, the figure of a man walking in the snow, escorted by birds that could have killed him but protected him, was not entirely strange to him. As if he had ever dreamed about it. Perhaps it was when he thought of the soul of his father ascending and shaking the branches of the forest that distant day, similar to the soul of a bird relieved of the weight of his body. He still couldn't get that memory out of his hands: it had been like carrying a dead bird.

The horse reared. He had pulled the mane too tightly while he remembered. The sun peeked over the steppe, drawing elongated figures of men and horses. He then saw, very close, the sleighs scattered and still, dogs crouching and men standing, holding spears high. He almost even thought he saw the marks of the veins like spiders grown on the cold faces, which did not blink, the effort with which they furrowed their foreheads to not tremble was clear.

Tol raised his arm in a sign of peace, palm open.

"Cover me, but don't attack," he ordered his men.

Tol began to ride slowly, until the strangers' dogs prevented him from continuing. The animals had approached and were barking at the tarpan. The horse neighed, shook its head, shook its mane. He tried to buck several times, but Tol held him down with his heels.

The strangers looked at him, without speaking to him. Tol dismounted, as prHe was trustworthy, and said what he usually said to strangers.

-I come from the Northern Village. We are brothers of land and peace.

The other then left the spear on the sled, while the others, one after the other, stuck theirs into the snow. Tol walked towards them. The white breaths mixed and melted in the morning air.

-My name is Tarkus. "I belong to the great caravan that comes from the North," he said with an accent that Tol had already heard from other travelers who had arrived from those regions.

"We have heard from you," he replied, "but nothing about what you are looking for."

-We are going to the South, beyond the Great Sea.

Tol's skin, previously so shiny from the sun's reflection on the snow, paled slightly. He put a hand on Torkus's shoulder, and he stepped back.

-Do not be afraid. Look at my men. They are attentive to us. If either of us dies, revenge will not be fruitless.

Then Tol invited him to sit on the edge of the sleigh. The tarpan approached its owner, slowly, while the dogs barked. Tol patted him on the shoulder to make him return to his men. He sat back down next to Tarkus.

-I am from those lands, and my name is Tol.

His voice was clear and low, as if he were speaking in her ear. Tarkus, who looked at him in amazement, said:

-My leader's father had your name.

Tol closed his eyes and took a deep breath before asking, covering half of his face with one hand, as if he feared that what he was going to hear would be stronger than hope, or less than a handful of melted snow. Sun. In both cases, he did not yet know if he would tolerate the truth.

-And what is his name?

Tarkus had not understood.

"What's his name?" He repeated, letting the other see his cloudy eyes between his fingers.

However, Torkus was now wary.

-Why do you want to know?

-Maybe he knows him... -But the mere idea that what he sensed was true overwhelmed him more than all that time of uncertainty during which he had imagined all kinds of possibilities. -I had two sons, and their name was Zaid, the eldest. , and Sigur, the smallest.

Tarkus looked at the man in front of him as if he were seeing something he never believed could exist other than in tales or stories. The father of the great man of the North, liberator of lands and bear hunter. The one protected by the strange black birds, whose mission had terrified the towns they had passed through during those four winters. He knelt in front of Tol.

-Mister! I never imagined this privilege, to be the first to discover that our leader's father is alive.

He had grabbed Tol's hands, and was kissing them.

"Man, don't humiliate yourself," Tol asked him. "Your people are watching you."

"I don't care, they will do it too." And he stood up, gesturing for the others to come closer.

Tol thought it necessary to call his people.

"Dismount and leave the horses far away, the dogs will scare them!" he shouted.

Tarkus had surrounded himself with several men, who were being joined by others from the last sleds. The dogs didn't stop barking, but no one paid attention to them anymore.

"We have found our Chief's father," Tarkus told them, and he was going to put an arm over Tol's shoulders, as if he were a recovered friend, but he realized how bold he was. And as each of his men came forward to bow, he murmured in Tol's ears:

-Sir, I would like to be the first to announce this news to his son, but I will content myself with bringing him to his presence. This, my Lord, will make him fully recover.

Tol was now the one who looked at him with suspicion.

-He has fallen ill. I think the wind sickness hit him a few days ago, and he's been delirious. He looked up at the storm clouds, which were still calm. Maybe there's nothing left of the caravan right now.

-I haven't waited this long to see him die when I'm so close to him. Let's go quickly, and they better have taken proper care of it.

He had not planned to be harsh with those who revered him, but he knew he possessed a new respect that was difficult to break, which elevated him not only above the common men of his village, but also those foreigners.

And above all, the new image of his son made him proud. Sigur's actions, whatever they were, had elevated him as well.

The sky was still covered by a blanket of clouds that descended like fog over the valley. Tarkus and his men preceded Tol's men and horses. When he saw the town, he shouted:

-They have been saved!

As they passed the steep hills, they saw that the spiral of the caravan remained intact. They heard the music of flutes and drums. The people were small like ants moving frantically between the palisades. The campfires were bright spots in the pale afternoon light, smoking with the white color that the clouds had alreadyThey had lost, and he seemed to rise to restore heaven.

The men of the expedition jumped off the sleds and hugged each other. The people of Tol watched them, with one hand on the horses' backs and the other covering their eyes from the pitiful reflection of the snow. Tol's

heart was beating faster, his throat had become knotted with something rising from his chest when he tried to breathe.

What will my son be like? A man, after twenty winters. Will he look like me, will he still have the color of his mother's eyes? Will he recognize Me? Will he love Me despite so much time? If he was only a little boy when we separated, how much will he keep in his memory about me?

Torkus began to repair his sleigh, and Tol approached him. They were almost at the mouth of the road that led to the hill of Sigur.

-Some old women have been taking care of him. I have not dared to oppose them. The thing is that his son has something that follows him and protects him by taking special forms, like birds or women. Sometimes, when you look closely, his body doesn't seem like it belongs to you. As if he were there and at the same time one saw a body from the past.-Torkus shook his head, underestimating his own words.-Do not believe in everything I say, they are opinions about what I do not understand, but you, who are his father , you will understand.

Tol paid all the necessary attention, but his thoughts led him towards the hill.

If I don't know him when I see him, my friend, I don't really know my son. He doesn't know me, either. We are no longer who we were, that is the truth. Nobody is the same as they were twenty winters ago. Nobody is yesterday. I fear that disillusionment will grow in us, lead us away from our chosen paths. Knowledge and ignorance. Where is the intermediate point of happiness. Far away, higher than the highest place in the sky.

"He has always waited for you, don't worry," Tarkus told him.

-He's going to be disappointed when he sees me. I also felt the same when I saw my father old and weak.

-But you are still strong.

Tol did not respond. Life in the lands of the Droinne with Zor and his family appeared vivid and clear to him, as if the forest sun surrounded him again in this valley. The memories once again had a real meaning, when the return to the past was already so close, on a hill a few steps away.

But what I was and what I am will not merge in my son's mind. The father of childhood is always bigger and more voracious than the father of maturity. I am ashamed of my incipient old age, so close, of my wrinkles and my disbelief. I am harder than before with the world, and weaker with my son. Gods of uncertainty, let that at least be enough!

Later, they continued on their way in two groups. One went down to the valley. The rest, with Tol, Tarkus and five men, climbed the dry riverbed that separated them from the hill of Sigur. Soon they saw the black tent, the

frays of leather flapping in the wind, the feathers of the birds rising and falling again in small whirlpools. Two guards at the entrance recognized Tarkus and approached. He ordered them to take care of the horses.

The fabrics of the entrance were separated, the hands of an old woman appeared at the edges, as hard and dry as the leather they were removing. The old woman's face looked in amazement at Tol, but he remained silent. It was dark. Tarkus walked almost blindly towards Sigur's bunk. Tol had been standing near the entrance.

-Why do you look for someone who is healthy in the bed of a sick person? -Said a voice from the fire.

Tarkus looked at the faint fathoms of green logs. Sigur was standing by the campfire, a loose black blanket falling from his shoulders. The blanket was open in front, revealing the red hair on his bare chest, and then it was drawn up to fall over his ankles. His hair had grown in those days of convalescence, it was long and tousled, still wet as if he had just come out of a bath. His hands were joined in front of his chest, and seemed to hold something that the shadow prevented him from seeing.

"Welcome, friend Tarkus," said Sigur, and his lips moved between his beard red as fire.

Tarkus had approached, but remembering who came with him, he simply bowed.

-My friend, aren't you happy to see me well?

"Sigur, someone is waiting for you," Tarkus answered, and pointed to the entrance.

Tol was still standing, holding his breath, although he seemed calm. A gust, and his jacket flapped in the wind. Then the wind also surrounded Sigur, whose blanket moved a little, then something stirred violently. What he held in his hands fluttered and he squawked.

"Who are you?" Sigur asked.

Tol approached. The light was on his back, and he did not allow us to see the shapes of his face. He got closer. He was already very close when Sigur stepped back with a tremor. The flames illuminated Tol's face, the same face of the father he had seen. This was twenty winters ago for the last time.

She could not speak, only a babble rose over her withheld tears. She then fell at Tol's feet and opened her arms. The injured and already recovered vulture flew out of the store. The beating of his wings was lost in the distance, while the old women followed him with their gaze.

Tol turned around for a moment, and looked again at Sigur, who had hugged his legs. A few tears fell down his face. His legs trembled, he took his son's head in his hands, and made him stand up.

Sigur obeyed slowly, clinging to his father's body, as if he were the four-year-old child that he used to climb on his shoulders.

They were now the same height. Sigur cried what he had not cried the day they separated. Tol held it with his sweaty and trembling, but strong hands.

"You still have the color of your hair from when you were a child," said Tol, approaching his son's lips to kiss him. Afterwards, they hugged each other for a long time.

Tarkus watched them, embarrassed, and left. He cast a sullen look at the old women, but they didn't need that to know they were superfluous, and they left.

Father and son sat by the fire fueled by new logs, looking at each other without saying anything.

"You have a grandson, father," said Sigur, after the silence. "The bird you saw coming out is a messenger for my son, who is in the North."

Tol had grown accustomed to the idea of being a solitary man. And suddenly, he was a father and grandfather, without knowing how to fulfill those tasks. He was a grandfather as his father had been, and he occupied the same place that his father had once occupied in the family. But Zor's honor had been short-lived, and his had perhaps come too late to enjoy it.

-My son is hope, father. I'll tell you everything.

It had gotten dark outside. The booming of the drums and the barking of the dogs that ran and played with the children could still be heard. But the two of them had gotten used to the darkness of the tent, and they let time pass as if it were a night longer than any other.

Sigur had food brought. While they were served, they continued to look at each other, sometimes in silence, other times talking.

-Do you know me, son? I know you barely remember me, I'm someone else now.

-Father, I look at you and I see the man who carried me on his back that day, running, surrounded by hot rocks, with my mother.

"I must ask, although I almost know the answer..." Tol murmured.

-They killed her. Reynod's men killed her...-Sigur looked at the growing fire.-I never said it out loud until today. Could you believe it? I don't know if I was waiting for you to do it, but it is the right day to get those words out of

my mind. They killed her, father. I saw them. And I saw her again later, in spirit, revealing to me the dishonor of our people.

-They told me that you are traveling to the south-said Tol.- But why? And those strange birds that follow you?

Sigur extended his left arm to show him the stump. Tol was startled.

-Don't worry. It hasn't hurt in a long time. My wife comes from places I don't know, from the lineage of sorceresses. She and my mother entrusted me with the task of recovering the lands of the Droinne for the old people who inhabited them, before the invasion and the massacre. I only know that they are going to return, the former inhabitants will return in some form.

Tol did not fully understand, but all this was not too far from his own objectives.

-I have been preparing an expedition there for a long time. I was going to find you and recover my father's good name. If your brother has survived.

-I have never seen him again, father. But we will return together. Your ships and my men.

He got up and asked her to go out with him. The night was starry. The clouds were dispersing. A cold but gentle breeze brushed their faces heated by the flames. A huge spiral of campfires stretched across the valley.

-I have more than seven hundred men left, not counting their families, ready to fight, pack animals and provisions. We have weapons and we can build more.

Tol began to think. It was more than he had ever expected.

-We will also take the horses, and your men will learn to ride. Boats loaded with our tarpans. We will train them on the eastern plains when we arrive. They will give us the advantage over Reynod's men. They must still have old weapons. When we return to the Northern Village, I will show you the instruments I invented.

Tol couldn't help but laugh out loud when he saw himself next to his recovered son, in front of that number of men and animals that would soon form his legions. He put an arm over Sigur's shoulders, looking at the fire snail formed under the stars.

A placid whistle announced the wind, which passed far above his heads.

The howling of some dogs, from time to time.

The grayof a man forcing his wife to dance to the rhythm of a flute.

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While Sigur's people stayed on the outskirts, Tol and his son and the leading men of both groups entered the Northern Village. It had been five days since they had postponed the departure of the ships, but Tol would have to make many changes.

"I'll go ask for an audience with the Assembly," he said to Sigur, who was looking at the town with curiosity.

-I was here when I was a child, I came to exchange skins for food. Now the town is bigger, or at least it seems that way to me.

-You're not wrong, son. When I arrived, it was half as long. It is not all my merit, but when they made me leader of his army, we undertook expeditions and I encouraged them to be stronger with the other towns.

"It was a peaceful village then," said Sigur, watching the fights in the street and in the fishermen's stalls, at the drunken men walking lost along the dock. Some women reluctantly clamored for their goods near the buildings that had multiplied from the port to far beyond the original limits of the village. The carts went through the packed mud streets, pulled by horses that had replaced the elk they used until a short time before.

Sigur was riding a tarpan, which he rode for the first time in his life. He barely spurred him on, so as not to hurt him.

"Beautiful animals," said his father. "We brought some from the steppe, and we left them on the coastal plain to breed." I'll take you to see them tomorrow, when you've rested. We will go looking for many more for your men.

-We will need time, father. Training…

-Don't worry, my warriors will teach them.

The twilight covered the straw and wood roofs in red. The great clay brick ovens smoked in dark columns that were lost in the uncertain mass of the growing gloom. The bustle of the town decreased in the shopping streets, but increased on the periphery, with the carts and horses, with the groups of men, women and children returning to their homes. The dogs barked, running among the people or under the carts. Through the windows you could see the newly lit bonfires and you could smell the smells of roasting meat, mixing with the sweat and dust of the streets. Near the dock, an enormous construction, similar to a large square wooden box with only one opening in front and another to the sea, let out the constant noise of the hammers.

-That's the shipyard. I worked there for some winters, and in the summers as a fisherman.

Sigur looked tired. Tarkus advanced with his horse towards him.

-Sir, we must rest.

"He's right," said Tol. "Sigur will go to my cabin, you leave the horses in the town stable." My people will give you cots and blankets.

Sigur gave permission to his men, and they were both alone. They rode a little further to the cabin made of wood, mud bricks and a roof covered with pine branches. The windows were closed. The grass grew thick around it, despite the snow. Some children had gathered by a bonfire. Seeing Tol, they threw snow on the fire and ran away.

"Come in and go to sleep," Tol said as they dismounted. "I'll keep the animals and heat water for you."

Sigur obeyed. The door was broken. The darkness inside seemed vaster than the size of the cabin, so much so that he could not see where he was stepping. He felt the dust under his feet, the noise of rats, the smell of rancid food. He saw the opaque line of a window and went to open it. Then the scarce light of the evening entered to illuminate the large and dirty room.

The cold embers of the fireplace seemed to have been extinguished long before. On the sides, on some shelves, there were bags of grain. Bows, arrows, hoes and maces hung from the walls. A barrel was covered with a cloth. In the center, a large table and two benches, covered in dust and cobwebs.

A staircase led to a floor where the bunk was. He climbed up, carefully feeling the steps that he knew would break if he leaned too hard. Straws from birds' nests and wood chips fell through the cracks in the roof, there were cobwebs with small insect eggs, which in the twilight light gave the appearance of bead necklaces.

Sigur lay down wrapped in short-haired elk skins. He didn't even manage to think about his parents' home that that warmth reminded him of. He closed his eyes and slept.

In the morning, Tol had gotten up before dawn and gone for a walk. When he returned, Sigur was still sleeping. He looked out from the stairs and watched him breathe calmly, still dressed, while the sun passing through the cracks covered him with white lines. He didn't dare wake him up, and he was left wondering what it would have been like to see him grow up.

Then he carried buckets of water from the fire to the barrel. He had prepared two cupsnes with milk and two pieces of pork.

Sigur must have smelled the smell, because he came down and greeted his father.

"The sun works every day and is not late when it rises," said Tol, with a smile.

-But the sun has never been sick, father.

-You have water for the bath. I'll have your things brought.

Sigur took off the tunic he had been wearing since he had been convalescing and the leather sandals, and stepped into the water. He sighed deeply. His body relaxed. Tol looked at his son's broad, strong shoulders and the stump of his left hand.

"I would have liked to take care of that hand for you," he told her as he gave her the bowl of milk.

-I already told you it doesn't hurt.

-How did it happen? -He asked, because Tarkus had not wanted to tell him.

-I did it myself, father, to survive.

But he didn't want to talk about it anymore. Tol sat next to him. His son was drinking, staring vacantly at the walls of the cabin.

-I once had an assistant. He was still a child. Sometimes he reminded me of you. Then he grew up and left. We felt like strangers when this happened. He had raised him, but as he grew up he became a man like any other, and I had stopped being in his eyes what he had seen when he was a child.

"What do you see in me?" asked Sigur, who was looking at him with his elbows on the edge of the barrel and the bowl in his right hand.

-I don't know. I see a man different from my son, who, however, is still my son.

-I don't want us to be strangers, father. Our work will not allow disunity.

Tol decided to get rid of disturbing thoughts. He got up to help himself to a piece of meat, and brought some for Sigur.

-This morning I asked for an audience. We must show up in two days. In the meantime, we'll go look for horses. Finish eating and get dressed.

He got up and went to the entrance. A group was approaching.

-Here comes Tarkus and other men. Two women bring you clothes and flowers.- He turned to Sigur, smiling again.-They adore you, my son, and that makes me proud.

The morning was so clear that it made him blind. Winter was ending, and warmth was slowly settling on the steppe. Weeds made their way through the melting ice in small pools that formed streams, like threads of nets on the plain. The village piled up its waste in the surroundings, and a smell of excrescences stirred by the thaw had arisen. Tol would go to the village that morning.

-I'll come back to look for you.

Tarkus stayed to report to Sigur, who listened while the women dressed him, placing balms and spices on his body. They fixed his hair, washed his feet with oil, and put necklaces on him.

"Take care of my father's house," he ordered them when Tol returned to look for him.

They saw them riding toward the tarpan region.

As we left the village, the packed dirt paths became rocky. The eastern sky was pink and gray like goose feathers.

"We will arrive tonight," said Tol.

Sigur looked at the plain under those colors. He could hardly remember any other land than that of snow white. The trotting of the horses made him sleepy. He rode with his father all morning, but the conversation fell into a silence interrupted only by the laughter of those talking behind. Tol was thoughtful, and he had his gaze lost on the horizon. Sigur reined in his horse and joined his father's men, who fell silent as he approached. He accompanied them without speaking. They seemed uncomfortable, but Sigur showed no expectation of any special treatment. They remained silent for a long time, until realizing that they did not dare to speak first, he asked them:

-How long have you been in my father's service?

-Ten winters, Lord. There were battles abroad, but nothing a good group couldn't do with ease. He is a great leader, he could rule the entire people if he wanted to.

-Where have they been?

-In the east, where the ice is. Then we went from there to the south. There are tundra forests and strange animals. Once, the savages attacked us by surprise, between two stone walls. It was a cold night and we took

shelter there from the wind. But Tol managed to organize us after the first attack, and we defeated them.

The man had begun to look for something under his jacket. He took out an amulet.

-This belonged to one of those men. His father Tol gave her to me for my bravery.

Sigur wanted to see what it was, and the other extended his arm to show him the amulet. In the golden afternoon light he saw a dry, almost black finger, with hair on the back. He closed his eyes, but the other didn't notice the expression on his face. Then he opened his eyelids again. It was an intense and fast pain, nothing more. Only the pain that repeats itself from time to time with the memory. But something remained: a hint of anger. or the bodies are equal, no hand is better than the other, nor more or less worthy of a caress or a kiss. The hand of that savage is also my hand.

-Wait! -He said angrily.

They looked at him, wondering how they could have offended their boss's son.

Sigur peeled the cloth from the stump and extended it.

-Look and ask me if it hurts!

The other did not answer, but on his face you could see the effort to contain an insult. The fear of Tol's punishment was greater, however, than the challenge that the son was making to them. Those in front stopped when they heard the discussion. Tol turned around as Sigur began to wrap his arm around him.

-I thought they knew, father. That what had been said about me had reached them. But not even my father knows me, and I must endure the offense of your men.

-How have they offended you, son, and I will kill them?!

Tol looked at the others, who looked down.

-I'm talking about the amulets that you give them as a reward. Pieces of men. Fragments that could be from your children.-And he raised his left arm, still half covered, to remind her what he was talking about. Then he came a little closer, and murmured in his ear.

-Today no one has offended me more than my own father.

He rode away, ahead of everyone. His men followed him, just waiting for a gesture to attack Tol's people, but he said nothing.

-Return to your formation! -Tol ordered- And you... - he said to the one who had spoken to Sigur -... you will return to the town with a guard! He no longer belongs to my army!

It was dark when they stopped. No one spoke while they ate. Three bonfires illuminated the silent chewing of the warriors and the worried faces.

Tol and Sigur had not looked at each other again for the rest of the day and that night. They went to bed after feeding and brushing the horses.

Before dawn, Sigur was standing over his tarpan, brushing it. Tol felt cold, he had gone to bed almost naked from the heat of the trip, and he had tremors running through his body. He covered himself with the blankets and rubbed himself for a while, then got up and went in search of the water that was warming in the campfire. One of his men helped him put on the oxhide tunic that the women had made for him when he was named chief. His fur was thick but it molded to his body comfortably. A hat covered his head and part of his face, closed under his chin. He put on his boots, and went to where his son was.

Sigur had sat in the snow with his hair wet and his elbows resting on his knees, chewing on a fragment of deer fat.

"There is milk in the saddlebags," said Tol.

His son looked at him, without moving, without greeting him. It was dawn, and the sun rose behind the rigid, desolate figure of Sigur. Golden spots and holes of orange sun would have passed through the curls, which slowly seemed to stretch as they moved in the morning breeze.

"We must leave, Lord," said an assistant bringing the horse.

Tol nodded.

-Come on son.

Sigur threw the remains of the food on the ground. With neatness and parsimony, like someone doing a job for the first time and wanting to do it well, he prepared the saddle and climbed up. The horse started.

-That animal doesn't suit you, son. It is dangerous and disobedient.

-Don't give me advice, father.-And he trotted towards the twenty horsemen who were waiting for them at the mouth of the next valley, where the wild horses were.

A cloud of dust on the plain hid everything other than the sky. Only a few birds and the mass of dust spinning in the air could be seen. The men stopped, but the horses tried to run towards that dust.

"Some here," Tol indicated to the left, then he addressed those on his right. "You advance a little further on the other flank." We must catch as many as possible today.

He was thinking of the Assembly. He had to return to the village before the memory of his last performance grew cold in the memory of the elders. He had to convince them to start a war in which they saw no objective, and which for him was beginning to make more and more sense. His wife was dead and one of his sons perhaps too, but the vindication of his father's memory, and the anger he still held in his hands - Zor's face in his palms like a burn that never went away - were the impulse that drove him. It led him to feel the impetus of force and battle combined in the same confusion of opposing forces, death and blood in daytime dreams, as if he were seeing there the red northern sky, so similar to his son's hair.

Twenty horsemen rode in formation, then the next group advanced. Tol and Sigur stayed to wait for the tarpans' reaction. The dust grew thicker, and the sound of hooves died away in the snow. Sigur's horse reared and reared up on its hind legs. He tried to hold him back s reins, but the animal began to run towards the others. Tol saw them disappear in the cloud of dust, from which horses continually emerged trying to escape from the ties.

"Here, I have it!" the voices shouted.

Neighing and hoarse voices, cracks of whips and trotting hooves... Tol entered the cloud and saw his son controlling his horse with difficulty. He held onto the mane as if the animal were the vast mantle of the land to be conquered.

-Son!

But Sigur wasn't listening. He had held a rein around his waist and was preparing the lasso with his good hand. The horse continued to buck, but he held it back by slapping his calves on its flanks.

The tarpans ran around the men. The whips whistled like a wind, devastating the calm peace of midday that had existed until they arrived. When they caught one, they wrapped the head with cloth, and the animals calmed down and let themselves go.

Then there appeared, with a different brilliance, a brute flower in the middle of the snow, the most beautiful tarpan than any Tol had ever seen. The snow dust fell on its completely red back, without streaks or changes in tone throughout its fur. It was more like fire than a wild flower, more like the setting sun than all those field flowers in summer. He shone resplendently, not reflecting the light, but highlighting in front of her his slender figure, with a wide neck and long mane. The beads of sweat gave him purple reflections on the thick line of long, curly fur that began under his snout and

continued along his neck, chest, and belly. The tail was broader than that of any other tarpan, and when it moved it seemed to spread out like wings.

Sigur hadn't seen him yet, and he was trying hard to catch another one. Tol looked at his men, and they nodded.

-It's yours, Lord!

-Catch him!

He knew that owning that horse would honor him. One more sign of his strength in contrast to the pale wisdom of the members of the Assembly. With that trophy, with his son recovered and the legend that he had brought with him, they could deny him nothing. He could already see himself traveling by sea towards the lands of Droinne. But he heard Sigur's voice spurring his horse, and a different tone had seeped into that voice.

It was almost a child's voice.

The snow rose and fell, incessantly, like ash.

Snow is ash, ash is fire snow.

It was like seeing him back twenty winters before: running hand in hand with Sulla, his back hurt. Little Sigur lost in the ash of the volcano.

And he knew that there was no longer any distance, that time was not a sufficient obstacle to erase not only the suffering of losses, but also the power that linked him to weapons, even the glory obtained at the expense of the people who had saved him.

"I never gave you anything, son," he murmured, or thought. The truth was that no one could have heard him. And when his men waited for him to run towards the red horse, he stood still. He just pointed there, because Sigur was looking at him right now, and he understood. His son was lost again among the white shadows, the silhouettes of the tarpans galloping wildly, fleeing from the men. He couldn't see him again for a long time, and he stayed waiting, pretending to control his people.

Sigur appeared again. He was now running a short distance from the red horse. He rode easily, somewhat bent over his back, with his handless arm tied to the neck of his tarpan, and with the other hand holding his whip high. He spurred the animal and made the lasso spiral. The whip raised a whirlwind, and the figure of Sigur rose in the middle, emerging unscathed. Higher than the other men, like the center of a storm. And the red horse ran ahead, its long mane moving with the wind, moving like grasslands in the spring.

Then Tol saw, when the animal passed just an arm's length away from him, that the animal was crying. There were matted furrows under his eyes, darker than the rest, without the sheen of sweat.

But the horses don't cry, he is tired, and his eyes are irritated by the dust.

He couldn't help but watch him as he circled the circle his son had forced him into. Sigur raised the whip, but the red horse had its head bowed. The noose hit his neck and hurt him, but without trapping him. Sigur made attempt after attempt. Finally the whip looped around the neck, and Sigur pulled, resisting the force of the animal that was dragging him. The horse stopped, began to circle around Sigur. He continued to resist, rearing from time to time, but his strength had subsided.

All the men stopped to watch. Sigur watches the horse's movements without letting go, also circling with his arm above his head, watching every snort, ace of sweat and mucus in the animal's jaws. The tarpan no longer ran, but trotted quickly and without stumbling despite its fatigue, always with its head up.

Sigur loosened the whip until the tarpan followed the trot he marked. The noose didn't hurt him now, but blood was coming out of the mark on his neck. Then he freed him, and the horse stopped trotting. He continued neighing and kicking nervously, standing in the middle of the snow like a pink bonfire made of green logs.

"Steady, still!" Sigur said as he patted his back. Without dismounting, letting both animals rub against each other to smell each other, he caressed the mane, neck and head. The tarpan allowed itself to be touched. From time to time he would withdraw a little, but then he would submit again.

"Prepare the animals!" Tol ordered his people.

Each trapped horse already had its noose around its neck, and the men were joining them one to another. If anyone wanted to escape, the rope would tighten around the necks of the others. Tol rode to where his son was. Sigur was still agitated, his clothes and hair wet with perspiration and covered in dust.

"You've earned it," he told her, placing a hand on Sigur's shoulder, but his son looked at him coldly.

"You're not going to ingratiate yourself with me by offering me gifts," he replied.

Tol pushed his hand away. He cocked his head disapprovingly.

-I thought you had grown up, but you are still a child.

He was going to turn his back when Sigur spoke to him.

-I would have liked, father, if you had not abandoned us.

-How old were you? Eight or nine winters, it seems to me. Maybe I was wrong to judge you. Maybe you don't remember exactly what happened.

-Yes I remember.

-You know nothing!

Tol was angry, and Sigur's gaze did not help him calm down. -I had to stay with your grandfather, he was injured and I couldn't leave him alone.

-I remember my mother, who called you and shouted: the children!, and you stayed behind. I still feel her hand squeezing my left hand.

Tol looked at the stump of his son, the pain was sincere on Sigur's face. He sighed with a groan.

How to overcome this enormous river that separates us. I barely see you on the other shore, I barely recognize you. And you're not even listening to me.

"He was my father, and he had no one else," said Tol.

-But in all this time I have thought that we could have stayed together, us and grandfather.

-Impossible. They had to escape from the mountain and he couldn't run. We had to separate or die together, and it was not an easy decision for me. If you could ask your mother, she would tell you the same thing.

Sigur stood tall in his saddle, his good hand still holding the lasso that tied him to the red horse.

"But I can't," he answered his father.

That was a harsher rebuke than anything he had heard before from his son.

-Are you blaming me for your mother's death?

-You abandoned us!

Tol's hands were shaking.

-Cursed be the day you were born to reproach your father! Don't make me say what I didn't dare tell anyone yet.

You abandoned us.

But it was not his son who repeated that, but the voice of the northern lights, of the waves on the cliffs of the North Village, of the night wind that hit the rocks bringing the sound of his family through the sea.

He jumped from the saddle, lunged at his son and they fell to the ground. The horses fled and stopped, lost in the dust of snow, hiding the men who were returning to the town. Tol had fallen on Sigur's body, but he was not trying to defend himself.

"Don't make me say it..." Tol muttered. His voice was hoarse, almost unintelligible due to suppressed crying, his brow wrinkled, his hands trembling. He caught himself, as his voice became a sour sound of resentment and sorrow. His fists did not come off Sigur's coat. They were so close to him that he could feel the sweat, touch his son's beard with his face, and it was like looking at himself.

-I killed him! I sacrificed him so they wouldn't kill him. They blamed him for the explosion of the mountain... -His voice broke for an instant.-The witcher's hunters were going to burn him alive.

He buried his face in his son's neck, and loosened his grip on her fists. He moaned with small suppressed screams. Sigur still didn't look at him, staring at the twilight sky. In the distance, the herd was walking away with the men wrapped in a cloud of snow dust.

"I needed you," said Sigur. "I was so afraid."

Then he put an arm around Tol's back, lying next to him, part of his body on top of his and his head against his neck. He felt his trembling, smelled the same old aroma from when his father lifted him on her shoulders, and then he hugged him. Slowly first. Then, seeing that his broad back had lost the strength of his youth, he closed his arms a little more.

He looked at his good hand, then at his left one, the one that didn't exist and yet he could still feel. And with his stump she caressed his head between her fingers. Ana and her father's long hair.

*

The Assembly met once every winter in the same place where the competitions were held. There were ten days to present projects for the following season. It was the busiest time in the village, apart from festival days, and long lines could be seen every morning in front of the judges' representatives. Men with graying beards, with rolls of leather parchments under their arms, so covered in coats that nothing but their pale eyes could be seen through the frost on their eyebrows.

At the beginning of the first day of the Assembly, orders were no longer accepted, however there were always those who tried, trying to sneak between the groups of exhibitors waiting at the entrance. Throughout the day there were disorders and fights between the guards and those who

wanted to enter without permission. Some brought their children to mix with the crowd, cause disturbances and distract the guards. Then, as if the thaw and the first warm vapors among which the dark green of the moss appeared under the frost were calling them, many decided to spend the whole day inside the warm room, always fed by the large bonfire that illuminated the high ceilings. and the walls of mud and logs.

Starting on the sixth day, only the town authorities, the oldest families, merchants and expedition members were allowed to enter. Then, the merchants and their women filed through the entrance, dressed in elk skins and bright necklaces brought from the regions east of the Great Sea. The men, whether expeditionaries or merchants, passed with their heads raised, without deigning to look at the men. who followed them with their eyes. They wore jackets over tunics woven from ox manes and tails. The caps marked their hierarchy, made with the skin of red foxes or white elk, which were only found in the western mountains. Some had colorful feathers, showy but without the noble appearance of the others.

On the tenth day, in which the entire town was allowed to participate, it was the turn of the defense forces. Tol had managed to obtain this special day for the past five seasons, and it was an event that had elevated him above all ordinary consideration given to other village officials. They recognized the improvements that he had proposed, the training of the recruited men, the good spirit that they showed towards his boss, the weapons invented by Tol. The ships had increased in number, built even during the long nights of summer. Travel was also more frequent, and people no longer waited for those who had left to return before sending new expeditions to other places. He had told his men not to embark foreigners, not to bring women or children. But sometimes they disobeyed, and Tol expelled them from his forces.

On the morning of the last day of the meeting, the majority of the town was thinking about the night's festivities. An occasion when the village authorities were in charge of the preparations, because that night the town would be the object of the entertainment. Many gathered since the afternoon to wait for Tol's departure, who, like every season, was going to present his projects. But this time word spread that he had found one of his lost sons, whom the messengers coming from the north had heard about. This meeting of great men, who were also father and son, excited them with ideas of splendor, of families that were beyond everyday pain and sorrow.

Tol and Sigur arrived on their horses, encouraged by the shouts of the people who made way for them and threw branches of spices at them. The guards tried to maintain order, but they were unable to calm those around the expedition leader and his son.

The large bonfire illuminated the stands, where the judges and their assistants watched the entrance of the exhibitors. Sitting at different distances, so as not to talk to each other or influence the judgment of

others, they listened to the proposals and voted. The assistants then sang the votes for or against, and a roar of drums closed the presentation.

Tol brought in three of his men with heavy scrolls in their arms. They bowed, turning towards the four points of the circle of stands. Then they stood still. Tol went up to the central platform. Sigur took a step back.

-Honorable judges. Today I have the joy, before starting my presentation, to present to you one of my children, whom I have recovered after a long time.

Sigur bowed to the hunched figures of the elders, hidden by the shadow that fell from the roofs beyond the firelight. Above, the platform where Tol had fought long before seemed to sway over everyone's heads.

-Hehas a mission, Gentlemen, and it is to return to the lands from which the men of my original people were expelled. As your father, I have found myself in the strange discomfort of deciding between my duty to you and my duty to my son. But I came to the happy discovery of seeing that both could be reconciled, to be a greater and more effective power.

He gestured with his right hand, and his men walked toward the stairs of the stands. They unfolded the scrolls and handed them to the assistants. The judges looked with patient resignation at those schemes, which they had already seen before.

-I have dared to bring these maps modified by new plans. Our expedition will not be limited to the South coast to advance towards the west. We will change direction towards the Droinne River delta, beyond the Lost Mountains.

The judges studied the changes in silence. Their bald heads shone when their heads were lowered and the flames penetrated the darkness of the stands. The thin, freckled hands still glistened in the shadow in which they barely moved. Tol let the silence be the calm guide of the old people through those lands they would never visit.

"For what purpose?" asked one of them.

-The annexation of land, Sir. The usurpers took over the vast regions, dominated my people and expelled them for more than two hundred winters. The last of them has been in power for almost forty winters, and he has degraded what remains of my people with blood rites and sacrifices, he has sublimated them with the fear of gods of vengeance that he claims to hear. He has kept them in ignorance and away from all contact with the rest of the people. We will have new lands under our dominion, and we will bring the benefits of this culture that you, wise men of the North, have contributed to the wisdom of the world.

The old man who had spoken stood up, and the scroll fell from his knees with a cracking sound.

-For a long time you have brought us plans and projects that we have reluctantly approved. Your travels, the new modalities of the army, the ships, the weapons, have created an unforgivable delay in other needs. The people with whom we have traded no longer visit us, because they fear you. The inhabitants of the periphery enter the village and loot it at night because our trade is no longer convenient for them. The shipyard grounds expand, workshops for instruments of war proliferate everywhere, and you don't let the merchants participate. You have turned our village into a town of warriors, and discontent grows.

The others nodded. Another of the judges spoke.

-Your army has caused mischief and injured our own men, while you went to catch tarpans with your son. They are angry because they believe you have betrayed them.

Tol was going to speak, but the judge raised a hand to stop him when an assistant approached him to speak in his ear.

-I have received reports that three women were raped and found dead last night. Two of your men were arrested this morning.

But Tol was angry.

-Who dared to stop them? Am I not the force of order?

The judges looked at each other.

"We have formed a control group faithful to our criteria," said one of them, and sat down again, with his hands clasped on his chest, his gaze straight and fixed on Tol.

They have planned everything before I came in, and they made me talk to humiliate myself in front of Sigur.

Tol felt that that day everything was ending: the trip he had planned for twenty winters.

Only if I submit, if my obedience is greater than the rest of me.

-These are my requirements, Gentlemen.-He began to say, and without waiting for permission, to formally finish what he had started in the same way.-I need three more ships than those already prepared to carry my son's men and the tarpans. . I also request permission to be absent for a period of time that I cannot determine with certainty. He left all this to the honest lucidity of those who listen to me.

He waited for the sentence. He looked at his men, and they nodded.

-Denied!-was the shout of the judges' spokesperson.

Drums echoed through the cracks in the dry earth floor, announcing the end of the Assembly. But Tol continued to speak even though he was prohibited from doing so after the sentencing.

-You took care of me, but you are not my people...!

The assistants called the guards, but Tol did not stop talking, resting an arm on his son's shoulders.

-He is the only thing I have left of the old town! The gods, if they exist, know that I have never stopped at anything, nor have I doubted anything. Men, attack!

His war cry was such that it had never been heard since the competition he had won there. His men ran to the entrance and pushed the soldiers away. Ardias that had begun to arrive, closed the door again and mounted to disperse in the direction of the shipyard, the stables and the port.

People's screams came from outside, but they did not understand if they were for or against them. Tol faced the old men.

-I'm not going to hurt you if you obey me!

Ten more men entered after pushing through the crowd and knocking down the guards. Boots clicked on the boards. The judges sat down, but the assistants were beaten and tied up.

"Rebellion will only lead you to crime," said one of the old men.

Tol looked at Sigur and started laughing.

-Did you hear that, son? They are wise old men who know nothing. All the men in this town are talking stones, nothing more. We talk and we know no more than a stone can hear. There is no way to know each other. We are beasts in a dark forest, animals that hunt each other. Today I am the hunter.

He also had the judges bound, and joined his son in speaking with the leaders of his people.

"The reinforcements must already be arriving," said Tol, and soon they heard the trotting of the horses approaching, now confused between the screams and the dust that enveloped the place in a cloud that could not settle.

-I don't trust anyone. We must wait for those who come back before making any proclamations.-Tol separated from the others to meditate with his hands behind his back, circling between the stands.

"Come," he said to Sigur. "What do you think?"

-You don't need my approval, father. It's the town you've lived in.

-Rebelling means too much, my son. I don't want to appear weak to the others, but I still doubt...

Sigur looked at him coldly, as if distrusting that this doubt was true.

-You don't trust your father, Sigur.

-I trust my father in my regard, but I am learning to know you. I made your memory something different from what I see now.

The reinforcements arrived. The boots echoed again around the bonfire, fanned by the wind of bodies going from one place to another, controlling the hostages, fighting against the guards, stopping those from the town who wanted to enter.

-Everyone is with you, Lord!

-They want to proclaim it...!

-In the town they are preparing weapons and sent messengers to neighboring villages. They incite them to rebel too!

The men spoke to him almost all together, panting after having ridden up to him.

"They know their father well," said one to Sigur. -They know that he is the most faithful and prepared man in the town.

-He has worked with us, and promoted through his own merits since his arrival as a homeless man, that's what you hear on the streets.

-Sir, the judges have never deigned to talk to people. It's time to replace them.

-He could become the king of the entire North if he gains the support of the villages.

Tol listened to them without anxiety. It seemed right not to exacerbate his temper.

-Our objective is the trip to the South.- He looked at Sigur and felt satisfied that he had made that clear. -But while we prepare the ships, we are going to be the new leaders of this town. I'm going out to talk to them.

Then everyone stood aside to let him pass, and they took the judges away.

-We will use this place to settle. Bring food and supplies. Send for the shipyard workers and the stable men. My son is going to train his people.

Sigur hugged his father and they left together. The doors opened and a burst of euphoria entered with the afternoon light. Caps, branches and flowery fabrics rose towards the sky. The sun shone in the men's eyes. They left the doors open, while Sigur walked through the ranks of warriors holding back the crowd. Shouts of joy alternated with phrases of death for the judges.

-Only a gesture is needed, my Lord, for them to be in your hands.

Tol listened to his second in command, and nodded as he watched his son walk away. The light in which the raised dust moved made the seeds and leaves that floated in the breeze shine. The tension of moments before had relaxed, leaving a feeling of uncertainty, calm but growing.

-They have been waiting for you for a long time, my Lord. They have seen how other peoples warred and conquered while we slowly advanced like old men, thinking of nothing but maps and trade. They see strength in you, and they give you their support.

Even before crossing the threshold, the warmth of the bonfire melted into the mist of people's breaths. Along with the wave of cheers and applause, the aroma of the earth fused with the aroma of sweat rose like a wind that absorbed everything in its path. Tol felt trapped by that smell of earth and men, and he was afraid to breathe deeply, like someone afraid to penetrate the origin of the world, the original chaos, which sIn the certainty of the gods it was more desolating than ever.

He had reached the circle that his men cleared for him to speak, but the crowd was slow to calm down. The women threw green leaves and stems that they wove and kept to burn at parties, blankets scented with oils. The men carried maces, spears and daggers. Objects that seemed to have been made out of idleness and that suddenly took on significance today when he realized who could be the repository of his trust, of the secret desires ruminated on at night. Desires that the heavy peace of the people could not tolerate, the restless anger that they did not know where it came from, as if peace needed to die to have meaning again, to disappear for a time under the dust and mud raised by the war.

Pending my gestures. Earrings from my master. One movement of my lips could cause a man's death. One careless, unintentional movement of my brow, and a hundred men for every fold of my brow will die tomorrow.

Earrings from my hands. They look at my palms as if they saw the future. Their faces, eager, with a grimace of strange voracity, seem to see the opposite of the life they have led. They turn red, bite their lips. They see battles and wars. The gestures of a hand make people succumb.

The thought of a single man, which has been repeated ad nauseam in each act. Heard in the waves of a beach and their crash against the rocks, in

the wind that crosses the sea, seen in the colors of the sky, spots, pieces of sun that have exploded in the depths of the night. The thought of a single man is the size of the desire of hundreds. It is not necessary that they agree, that they be the same object of anxiety. Only that some fit into the other, they fit together like lovers.

My quest is not theirs, and here I am, however, being their once repressed desire for rebellion. Finally expelled and exposed to everyone's sight, without shame, always growing before the unity that hundreds of men form by folding, by adding their handful of anger to the scream of others.

And a gesture of my hands, the movement of an eyebrow, will make them rise with their weapons raised, and kill.

The clamor for the words of that afternoon continued to slowly die down until well into the end of the day. Tol and his men returned to the building, closing the doors. The light inside was greater than that outside.

The stars shone palely, covering the town like a blanket of sick fireflies. People had sat down to wait for the decisions that were going to be made that night within the premises. Tol had spoken to them of a new mandate, of reforms in the system of trade, barter and navigation. But he knew that these reforms would make the merchants angry, and that is why he needed the support of more numerous forces: the sailors and the shipyard workers.

Tol sat in the center of the platform where that same afternoon he had begun his last presentation. The men ripped the boards off the stands and formed a circle around them. The high stands, empty, the lower ones broken, the disorder of splintered wood on the floor, the remains of food, weapons and clothes that the men had left when they entered, gave an appearance of pleasant familiarity to that place so full of memories. solemn

The bonfire illuminated the circle of the new leaders. The words seemed to light up with very brief sparks as they touched the air mildewed by the breath of those who had been there during the afternoon. The roof and platform hung over them, as did the night on those waiting outside.

"Sir, we must decide what to do with the judges," said the one on Tol's right.

"Advice," he asked.

Each one, starting the round with the one who had asked, gave his opinion.

-You have to execute them.

-It is necessary, to affirm our strength.

-I would not agree to that, my Lord, if it were not for the merchants. If they see weakness, they will join forces to defeat us.

Everyone nodded their heads and raised their voices. Small group conversations were then formed. Tol knew they were right. But he was thinking about his son, and the mere idea of what he would think made him sad. Afraid of feeling rejected by him, he wanted to show himself to Sigur as a pious man.

We have really grown. Am I an old man and he is a man, I wonder. We are still in the past that we do not live together. I behave like a father who must do the hard work to protect his son from the harsh world of men.

A clamor came from outside, the doors rumbled open, the flames stirred. Sigur was entering with his guard. Everyone got up and Tol went to meet him.

"How are your people?" he asked.

-Well, father, they have known about the revolt and they will support us. They are ready for tomorrow's training. How long will it take to start? r the trip?

"Wait," he said to Sigur, as he took one of his warriors aside.

"Await my orders for the execution," he murmured in her ear.

-But, Lord...

-I won't tell you again.

The other remained silent, and both returned to the others. The smell of the night was filled with the breath of stale food and wine.

-There is a lot to fix before we leave, Sigur, but we will do it while your people prepare and we get the ships ready.

One of Tol's chiefs touched his beard as he listened.

"Sir," he said, interrupting timidly, "they brought me messages from the port." There is a representative of the fishermen waiting for a hearing tomorrow.

"I just saw him as he arrived with two others carrying their harpoons," Sigur added.

-They say they want to clarify the situation with you. They expect advantages and benefits greater than those they have obtained until now.

Tol smiled disdainfully.

-Orders will appear everywhere, they will seek to benefit at our expense.

"That is why we must show ourselves strong," said the warrior to whom Tol had spoken aside.

-I know, but silence also serves to weaken enemies. If they don't know what we will do, they won't know how to act.

The man looked at Tol for only a moment, and then at Sigur, with the expression of someone who cannot penetrate a conflict zone, curious and even more restless than before, knowing that the decisions that also involved him would come from there.

Tol sensed that his own men distrusted those who came from the north. The cautious attitude he had taken, once so sure of himself, worried them. Since the arrival of his son, something had broken in the strength with which his boss commanded.

They await a new government and Sigur awaits his journey. What do I want, I ask myself. For twenty winters I nourished the desires and sleepless nights of my nights, and yet now I doubt. Traveling, fighting for memories of things that no longer exist. If my son heard these thoughts, he would call me a traitor. If my other self, the one from a long time ago, listened to me, I would make this hand stick a dagger into my body.

Tol looked at his right hand in silence. The men, after speaking among themselves, retired murmuring.

-Father, it will soon be dawn. Let's rest. A lot of work awaits us tomorrow.

Tol father had shiny eyes. With the hand he had been watching, he caressed Sigur's face. He touched his son's ear, eyelids and forehead. He leaned close to his ear, and murmured:

-Don't let me forget who we are. Give me one hit or as many as necessary to awaken my memory. My will will decline with the events that await us, but you will be responsible for raising it.

The footsteps of the changing of the guard were heard next to the entrance shutters, and those who were sleeping in the stands woke up and came down.

-I need your voice, son, the color of your hair in my memory.

Sigur was about to say something, but his father turned her back on him, almost ashamed, and lay down near the fire. He didn't sleep. He thought, with his eyes open and fixed on the flames. Sleepless not so much because of what awaited him, but because of what he had said.

I will not appear weak again.

*

When summer came, the short days disappeared. The snow was nothing more than hail covering the cabins, forming drips that slid down the roofs. Then, throughout the night they persisted in their attempt not to disappear, but the morning melted them.

Some dogs that were licking the puddles ran in fright when the horses trotted past. Tol and Sigur set out for the harbor before dawn.

The fishermen had insisted so much that it was no longer possible to ignore them. They wanted to accompany him on his journey, but he was determined to displace them when the time came to set sail. He wasn't going to take people who wouldn't fight his war.

Groups moved away from the tarpans and horsemen. Looking at Tol, you might think that he had always been an inflexible man, and yet he allowed his enemies to manifest themselves and grow in number. Many of those who supported him on the day of the Assembly had joined the merchants, who saw their trade in furs and oils in danger. The towns on the periphery were no longer supplied with them, and had supplied themselves since Tol had eliminated the judges' laws.

Tol also thought about them, while he saw the smoke from the chimneys and felt the smell of hot milk gushing and disseminating through the sky of the Village. Nearby was the sea, blue, almost gray as the clouds reflected their shapes in the waves. The aroma of the sea called to him more intensely every day, and he hoped that the boats would finally be ready. They had been working hard at the shipyard, construction was progressing steadily. The longing for him, seeing Sigur next to him, grew even greater.

The fishermen were waiting for him. Two of themand they approached Tol with obeisances. The calloused hands, scarred by knives and hooks, shook the hands of the men of the new government. The fishermen were men of few words, more assertive in their sullen gestures than in the virtue of their apparent submission. They insisted, calm and stubborn, on their requests.

Tol distrusted that humility. He knew they were capable of betraying him.

"I have not forgotten his requests," he said to the one who had spoken.

Some boats were setting sail, and the sails were unfurled next to the seagulls that had settled on the masts. The sun had already been born with its complete sphere, and it blinded them. Tol blinked and shifted. The other bowed again and took a new place in front of him. He had the expression of

someone who was undisguisedly distrustful, thinking that Tol was making time to postpone his promises once again.

-Sir, we have been waiting for a long time. We know everyone will benefit from the great journey, and we don't want to be left behind.

Another who was next to him spoke.

-The Assembly always tied our hands. The merchants became rich and we remained poor. We thought you would be different. But he's been working for strange people from the North.

A murmur ran through the group. No one had dared to speak to Tol like that.

Sigur put a hand on his father's shoulder; he had seen him put a hand on the belt where the dagger rested. Tol then raised his hand again. The horses had stirred, as if feeling the tension in that clear, cloudless morning.

-I see that my silence and my caution have been misinterpreted. That's why I'll tell you my plans so you can be calm. Ours is a war trip. We will not take people who do not fight. When we conquer, the next ships will go to trade.

"But how can we be sure that he will return," said the other, taking a fleeting glance at Sigur.

The man's challenge ended up exasperating him, and Tol turned to speak to his men. Then one approached and hit the one who had spoken last, while others threatened the rest of the fishermen with their spears raised. But the voice of the one who had been beaten managed to rise above the screams.

-He won't come back! -And he couldn't speak anymore because blood was coming out of his mouth.

Tol put on his fur cap again, murmured something in his son's ear, and they mounted. They rode at a slow pace, followed by the eyes of the fishermen who had stood still and trembling in the late, thick mist.

As they entered the Village, the bustle of the carts, the dogs barking next to the oxen, the screams of the women hawking goods, cleared the mist, opening it like a knife of sounds. They passed between groups of men with shovels on their shoulders who were going to clear the snow from the roads. Everyone stopped when they saw them, leaving the way clear for them, but without looking up. There were men asleep in the streets. Sigur recognized some of his people, who came at night to look for women. The men of the town had begun to grow fed up with the intruders who did not work, ate their food, and abused their wives and daughters.

One of Tol's men approached. The tarpans rode together.

-We have to do something with the opponents, Sir.

-I know. I will give my orders soon.

-They say that you are no longer what you were, Sir, that you have become weak because of his son.

-There are things you can ask of a man, but not of a father. The time will come, don't worry.

They walked away from the village toward the fields to the east, where Tol's warriors were training Sigur's men. The mist there was a white layer that rose slowly, as if it were suspended and tied to the sky with ropes. The horses ran, the riders fought with spears. Some fell, got back on, and continued practicing. Frost formed brittle puddles on the tundra.

Tol sent for the person in charge of training. The messenger returned with the man.

-How is everything?

-Very well sir. They have been prepared for days. Young Sigur will be able to tell you about the ability of his men.

-That's right, father. If we take longer to leave, the wait could strain her patience and his strength.

Tol walked away toward a group of fifty men who had their backs to the sun, practicing with bows and arrows. The others followed him and dismounted. The frost broke with his steps. It was very cold that morning, but the warriors were sweating and had bare torsos and hair loose over their shoulders. Stiff arms held the bows, and suddenly the arrows flew. The sunlight gilded the tips with dazzling sparkles. A flock of crows scattered before the rain of arrows, and some birds fell dead.

"Sir," the archer chief told him. "We need material."

-They will have it. Tol placed a hand on his shoulder. He was one of the few men he trusted. He had met him shortly after winning the competition, and he had taken him on as a teacher to learn what many in the village considered a useless art: the alchemy of war. The man had told him about the combustible capacity of the earth, the oils and the rock material. They had practiced together on the outskirts of town, and all of this merged into these new practices that were no longer a dream. They were real men who mixed with their hands the materials that he specially prepared at Tol's request.

-There is what we imagine, my friend. "The strength of the earth discovered by your skill," Tol told him.

The other was ashamed and looked towards the south, from where came a roar of beaten wood, covering the hum of arrows launched by ranks of twenty to thirty men. Several columns of smoke surrounded the celebration of many others who jumped with daggers raised.

"They are the ones who handle the catapults," they told him.

-And the smell...I see that the bait has worked.

The aroma of burning fat was dispersed in the smoke. Other men began running across the tundra, toward a mound of dirt that the new weapon had torn up. When they saw Tol coming along with the other bosses, they began to correct the mess.

"Sir, see the well we have left," said one as he approached, helpful and enthusiastic about what they had achieved after trials and failures.

The earth had been torn up. The smell was most intense at the bottom of the well, the size and height of three or four men.

-We have mixed the oils with fat, and the bait balls must be left to rest longer before burning, but they last longer.

There was a rectangular construction, supported in front by two columns of logs, and in the center by two wheels larger than those of a cart. Attached to the frame, a long series of branches linked by ropes ended at one end in the shape of a hollow container, like a large pot. Some men pulled on other ropes tied to the branches, harder as the resistance increased, tensioning them until it seemed like they would be torn from the support.

"Don't let her go yet!" some yelled at them, while others brought bait balls and put them at the end. Always with the branches tense, almost on the verge of breaking, they brought the torches closer. The flames were barely visible in the opaque morning light, between the smoke and the now less dense fog.

A flame erupted from the bait, which soon began to burn away.

"Fire!" several shouted at the same time.

-Careful, Lord! -They said what they surrounded Tol, but he knew that they were out of reach of him.

His hands released the ropes and the branches spread out like an arm closing in on itself. The sound of a whip cut the air, the branches shook the wooden frame, which trembled on its wheels. The fireball was fired, crossing the sky like a sun advancing without any notion of day or night, leaving a short trail of black smoke as it passed, which almost imperceptibly extinguished a while later.

They saw it pass over their heads, they felt the heat it gave off. But before it disappeared completely, they watched it with the same ecstasy as a shooting star, until it fell far away in the open field, where the tarpans ran, but not today, because the whole place had been cleared for practice. The roar echoed through the training field.

Tol and the others couldn't stop shuddering for a moment and ran, even though they were already out of danger. As much as he had expected it, he had not thought that the impact would be so great, and he remembered the eruption of the volcano. He thought of himself as a god: it was he who had now created fire and destruction.

Then he sought approval in the faces of the others, and found enthusiasm and amazement in all but Sigur's face. His son seemed to look at that well with fear, then look back, as if waiting for new balls of fire to come passing over him, surrounding him.

Tol realized that his son's hands were trembling, but the force of containing them hardened his body, made the hair on his neck stand up and made sweat run down his arms. Tol was almost sure that if his son had been alone, he would have covered his head with his hands and kneeled in the dirt to cry.

As the others were also looking at him, Tol wanted to distract them by sending them to measure the size of the well. He approached Sigur and took his son's face in his hands. His jaw was tense, his teeth clenched and his lips cold.

"I know what all this reminds you," he said. But think that the volcano and the sorcerer separated us. We will be the volcano now. Take comfort in this idea: we are the volcano.

-Sir!-gritaron, from afar. The figure of the one who clumsily approached was barely visible, running and stumbling on the mounded earth. Clouds of smoke hid him at times, and his voice could be heard behind the screams of those who continued training. A shower of arrows passed high above the man, while solitary birds scattered.

-Mister!

His voice was more peremptory, with a slant of tragedy in the tone. -There is revolt and betrayal! The merchants took over the shipyard and are going to burn it down!

The men had gathered around the messenger and waited for Tol's orders. He only thought about his ships.

-And the boats?

-Those who are in the water maintain our strength, Lord.

The messenger was panting and they gave him a drink. They soon forgot about him, when Tol ordered to look for the horses.

-Let a group take the town, the stables and the rest of the port. Another one to go to the Assembly building. We will go to the shipyard.

-I will go look for reinforcements with my people, father.

Tol agreed.

They rode back at a fast trot along the same road as that morning, but full of people coming and going, looking at the groups of warriors and horses, and when they saw Tol they turned away with a respect too officious to be sincere.

"They wait to see who wins to lick their feet," Tol said to his companion.

The wind dried his sweat caused by the thin air on the training field.

"Shall we attack, Lord?" asked the other.

-We will wait for them to attack first. We will go in peace. Go around the village and reinforce the rear entrance.

As his men walked away, he began to make out the outlines of the shipyard among the clouds of smoke from the chimneys. The high roof rose above all the other buildings, silhouetted against the turbulent background of the cloudy sky and the sea. The last construction of the town, where the ships that would travel the world were created and ejected. The only place Tol had really wanted since his arrival. Neither the complete power over that town and the entire region, nor the lands that he could have conquered, were as important as those wooden bones that were born from the shipyard. Masts and skeletons, sails similar to wings, the sway of the waves and the wind brushing the feathers of the birds in the port.

He felt again the perspiration that had run down his body in the heat of the fire. The stone balls from the volcano hurt his children and hurt Zor's back. In Sigur's face he had seen the face of the past. They were not two men, but a child and a very young father who was also afraid, so much so that he had found no better way to flee than to advance and kill. But above all he had to protect his own father with another, less undignified death: since the old man could not kill himself, his son would do it for him. And the blood on his hands with the marks of the spear, and his long cry, broken into pieces when the hunters came, saying they will not be able to kill him, it is out of his hands, I could still hear it over the helmets of the tarpans. His throat still hurt as he remembered, and his hands trembled like a frightened child seeking the protection of his father, who is also in the middle of the fire and whom he must save so that she can in turn save him. Father and son were one, like today, looking at Sigur's face covered in terror. And with the

fury that face brought out in him, he could make the ships finish being built to set sail towards the South.

Tol was sweating, but desperation could barely be seen in his eyes, and he would not let his men, stiff and waiting for orders, themselves fearful for the future, see his weakness. Everyone watched, at the entrance to the shipyard, as some men with long black jackets and belts surrounding their waists and torsos, under the orders of the merchants, took out the bodies of the shipbuilders. They piled them up near the entrance, there were perhaps more than twenty, and they continued to add up.

"Betrayal," said Tol. "And I know who he was."

The others remembered the man who had confronted Sigur days ago. But it was the last thing they thought before seeing the arrows coming from the shipyard, and they took refuge behind the wood and grain warehouses.

"Go to the Assembly and bring reinforcements," Tol ordered his second assistant. "Send word to my son that we need all the available men."

As the messenger was about to leave, three of his men arrived with a prisoner. Tol recognized one of the merchants, and began to beat him. The man twitched on the ground like a spasming dog, and he barely managed to scream softly before spitting out blood. Tol picked him up again from the fine clothes, like those that men of his profession used to wear: a white camisole made of worm silk, dirty with oils from the shipyard and dripping with blood. HaI tried to speak, but I couldn't. Tol fetched a bucket of water himself and wet the merchant's face, who spat out blood and teeth. Then he spoke in a hoarse voice.

-Damn you, foreigner.

Then he raised an arm, pointing behind Tol. When they turned around, they saw the column of smoke rising from the deck of a recently completed ship anchored next to the shipyard.

The time that burns with the ships! Twenty winters and summers put into every board, rope and cloth of the boats. My sweat on those ships. My soul in them. I burn and everyone will burn with me!

Father, my hands are in pain! I see the blood. A father is a father when he raises his children. A man is a husband if he takes care of his wife. And the futile and cowardly effort goes away with fire and smoke. It was better for me to have taken up arms and been defeated twenty winters ago, than to wait the same time and see myself thus mocked.

I am what I made of myself. I am my own god, who plays with me and laughs, who will kill himself exactly when I die.

He took out a dagger, and stabbed it into the body of the man at his feet.

-That's it! This is how the others will end up.-He looked at his people and said:-I want them to form a safe path through the village to the port. Use everything you find, destroy the houses if necessary. Go get horses and put them on the other boats.

The noise of those riding to his aid reached them.

-Here comes his son!

Sigur approached with horsemen and men on foot, armed with spears, bows and arrows, axes and clubs. There were perhaps more than a hundred warriors. Tol rode to meet him.

-Good son! Divide your forces in two, and attack only with the first column when I tell you. Don't take the builders into account, they must all be dead by now.

Sigur looked at the burning ship.

"Don't worry," Tol told him. "We can make it with what we have left." We will set sail after taking the shipyard. This town will be dead from today!

Sigur had never seen such anger in his father's eyes. Tol and his people set out for the shipyard.

They arrived very close to the entrance, but the men carrying out the bodies had already closed the shutters. From the openings in the sloping roof they began to attack them with arrows, but they protected themselves with their shields in a formation that he had taught them, a closed circle that advanced like the shell of a turtle.

The merchants' strength seemed to be limited to what they showed, and the only real threat was the destruction of the ships. The arrows only stopped long enough to prepare the bows again, and he would begin again. Tol and his men continued to advance very slowly, protected by the armor of shields that covered them from above and on the sides. Arrows broke or deflected against her. Some tarpans were wounded on their flanks, but not enough to stop them or remove them from the ranks.

They didn't attack yet, they just slowly approached the building. It was almost noon when the arrows began to become less frequent. Then Tol peeked out from behind the shield. The sun shone full on his serene face, a little pale for some time, with a short, graying hair. He raised one arm, and soon the footsteps of men could be heard coming from the large open beach next to the port.

Mounds of boards, remains of walls and huts occupied the enormous space where his men had begun to hack and destroy. But in the middle, two lines had formed, carrying a tree trunk on their shoulders, and they were approaching the shipyard.

The arrows stopped definitively. The heads of some merchants peeked through the openings in the roof, their blonde hair shining in the intense sun that occurs when the clouds clear, the rain ends and the fog lifts.

The shield shell was split in two, their shapes altered and reshaped. They were now two smaller turtles.

"Attack!" was Tol's cry.

The men carrying the log moved faster, almost running as they passed between them. A new shout of joy was suddenly heard, clear as a crash of waves against a pier: the log had destroyed the doors of the shipyard, and a great darkness issued from the mouth of the entrance.

The fragments hit the shields and scared the tarpans. The two groups broke their formation and lined up with their spears pointed forward and their shields in front of their chests. But the warriors were sweating. The dry leather covered with patinas of hardened oil heated easily in the sun, and the forearms seemed to be immersed in bonfires behind those shields.

The shadow inside faded, and they saw the skeletons of the ships. Through the scaffolding hanging from the masts, the merchants tried to escape towards the exits in the ceiling, but the arrows of those whoThey were waiting outside and they were detained. And their bodies fell one by one in an open space between the platforms, between Tol's men and horses.

The rebel warriors fled from behind. When they went out after them, they saw them throw themselves into the sea and swim, while the burning timbers of the ship fell around them. They saw them scream, raise their arms among the fire that floated over the waters, and then disappear.

"Execute the judges," he ordered.

He left a group guarding the shipyard, and went to see the road his men were building through the city.

From the port a wide path opened, protected on the sides by boards nailed like stakes, torn from the surrounding cabins. The owners lamented on their knees, crying next to the remains of their houses, but when they saw Tol they ran away. Others dared to follow him, clinging to the horse's mane and Tol's clothes, praying that he would not hurt them. He kept moving forward and ignored them.

"Loot the merchants' houses!" He said to his men, and they rode to the commercial area, destroyed warehouses and warehouses, and took supplies for the ships.

The long walk, at the end of the day, was so long that it reached the stables far from the town, even crossing the Assembly building. The horses had escaped through the doors opened by the looters, between the boards of the stands also torn off, and joined the others that arrived from the stables, and many more that came from the fields.

The animals ran towards the port. But soon there were so many that they had become a strong and devastating wind that raised dust and sand and dirt across the town. The thundering of the hooves drew the attention of those who lived further away and they came to watch the passage of hundreds of tarpans running towards the port.

And when the last of them began to cross the center of the village, straggling, their fur shining with sweat and the specks of dust and sand flying in the sun, there appeared, behind them and on foot, dense and dark, the army of Sigur.

They advanced slowly, almost with apparent reluctance, perhaps tired but with their minds renewed by the proximity of the sea, carrying their belongings wrapped in blankets and furs on their backs, or tied to the sleds that they dragged over the land now free of snow but still hardened. A multitude of dogs accompanied them, running around and preceding them with barking. The children jumped excitedly after the long, quiet wait to which they had been forced. They went ahead of their fathers who were leading the caravan, but their mothers went to look for them to take them back again, because they saw or sensed the danger ahead.

Tol had stopped at the door of the Assembly, from where he watched the horses pass by attentively, as if he could distinguish them one by one.

-Some females are pregnant, we will not be able to take them, especially now that we have one less boat. And I hope that six ships will be enough, because we will not leave anything behind.

His assistant knew those words meant more than they said.

"We will not leave anything standing," Tol repeated, in a slightly lower voice, looking at the people, as if he spoke to himself more than to others. Then he wrapped the tip of a spear with cloth soaked in fish oil stolen from the port's warehouses, and lit it with a torch. Without dismounting, he carried her as far up and back as he could, and he threw her hard toward the building.

The burning spear entered through one of the windows, and at first nothing happened, but soon the smoke and flames grew until they came out through the front door and the roof. Everyone watched as the building turned into a single bonfire of crackling wood, dissolving and collapsing. It was getting dark, and the light of the fire stood out under a clear, dark blue sky, even more desolate than the fire that rose towards it. A roar marked the fall of the building, but the flames continued to consume the remains.

"They will do the same with the village," Tol ordered, and he anticipated any possible resentment, because he knew that they had been born there. "Whoever refuses will remain, abandoned and among the ruins.

No one dared to look him in the face. They picked up the extinguished torches, wrapped them in bait, and passed, one after another, in a long line, by the fire. When they were all lit, they dispersed through the town.

Tol watched them ride to the doors of the still-standing huts, break down the doors and throw down the torches. The inhabitants came out screaming, and stood far away, watching their houses disappear in the smoke that rose into the darkened sky.

The night began to hide the shifting shadows of the arsonists. The news of what they were doing spread faster than them, and when people heard the helmetss of the horses, they fled from their homes to take refuge in the port and the nearby beaches.

"Fire!" the women shouted.

The children were crying, clinging to her skirts. The men took everything they could out of their houses before the men arrived. Then the rumble of the horsemen approached and preceded them before they could be seen behind the smoke that came from the rest of the town. They carried fire at the end of their arms, and the fire itself seemed to ride on spirited horses that only warriors could tame.

Many in the village had told the story of how Tol was saved from the flames in an old contest, and that the bonfire, fueled by the body of his opponent, had risen to him to illuminate the entire interior of the Assembly. As if the fire had been created especially for him. That is why now it was said that he gave it to his men from hand to hand, to form the largest bonfire that that region had ever seen. And the people wanted to save themselves by fleeing to the sea, where Tol had his ships ready. They would go to beg that god of fire to have mercy on them and take them with him.

Tol and his men rode back to the coast. In the port, they had to beat their way past people. The fire of the village illuminated the night, almost indistinguishable from the day that had preceded it. A white halo, with red flashes, lightning, rose above the town like half of an enormous sphere.

Tol's tarpan was frightened, and began to buck among the shaking of the people and his men, among the confusion and the fights to flee, to talk to him, among the cries of the women who threw themselves in front of the horses. with their children in their arms.

It must have been midnight. The guard was waiting for them along with Sigur's people. But his son was not there.

The stars looked like pale points above the flames. The fire was reflected in the water, and even the ships seemed to burn with the reflection of the fire on the sea.

"Wet the decks and keep the sails lowered!" He ordered, without taking his angry gaze from the lost ship.

All night long he watched the village burn. The horses had begun to board the boats. The men boarded with new weapons, logs, catapults, hundreds of bags with bait and containers of oil, bags with powders and grains, barrels of water and food. They went up loaded and returned in search of more provisions, pulling ropes that dragged barrels and logs.

There was no rest for anyone all night. And at dawn, while the sun little by little became stronger than the fire among the ashes of the town, some began to wake up from the light sleep into which they had finally fallen around dawn.

He had also dozed a little on the deck of one of the ships, but he washed his face and ordered his assistants to bring reports on the enlistment.

"We will set sail this morning!" He shouted from the deck to the men who had gathered to wait for orders.

Then they spread out around the port and the beach to board the other ships, rejecting the townspeople who wanted to board. Tol had ordered that whoever passed the guard must be killed, and there was no way for anyone to get close to him, neither the cries of supplication nor the prayers were enough. But he couldn't stop seeing the expression of those who remained, their sad faces, their desperate gestures. He watched them leaning on the railing, watching the people's attempts to overcome the guards and jump into the sea to swim to the boats.

A wind suddenly picked up, and he rubbed his face to get rid of the smell that came from the port. That aroma that he had had in his hands for a long time. He could see the fishermen with their fists raised, aimed at him. He saw the women kneeling with their heads covered and hitting the ground in anger.

But Tol needed to be silent. Because the word was equivalent to the risk of undoing everything in an instant, the wooden structures that separated him from the furious bustle and transported him to the past that he missed. Speaking or uttering words of justification was like taking pity on the world.

He turned his head to windward. Lined up next to his were the other ships, with their bows pointing towards the open sea. The hooves swayed placidly. The sails were being spread, the oars ready. The men climbed the masts, tying lines and ropes. Shouted orders could be heard along the decks, carried by the wind that ran between the sails and warped them. The

neighing of the tarpans emerged from the depths below deck, with a smell of wet hair that mixed with the aroma of the sea.

He saw a mass movement on the beach, an almost homogeneous group in its diversity of clothes and faces, which was moving until leaving aclearing into which other men were entering from the ruins of the village, along the newly opened path. Sigur was finally reaching the end of his army and his people, which he continued to approach with exasperated slowness. But no one from the village approached his son. Some moved away, covering their faces with their hands, but not out of fear, because they did not tremble. It was not the fear they professed of Tol, but a respect that went beyond the appearance of that red-haired man, a man of fire who came from the North, but rather the stories that had come with him. But the clothing also collaborated, as white as a patch of snow in the middle of summer, a large, clean white moon in the skies of the spring equinox.

Sigur had dressed in the bear's skin, and walked leading the red-haired tarpan by the reins.

My son, a moon in the middle of the morning, and the sun that follows it. The moon that slowly goes away, saddened but proud of its triumph. The sun that comes to calm the spirits of the nocturnal chaos in which instincts are added. They drag and push each other, curl and link, carrying each other, inseparable and always at enmity.

Sigur had arrived at the bridge that led to the ship. From a distance, people were no longer trying to board and had remained still and silent while they watched him board. The tarpan's hooves thundered on the boards. Some airy screams of women were heard in the silence that all the men had made. Tol was proud to be his father, and yet something disturbed him. The fire was still blazing in some cabins, but there were more columns of smoke rising from the embers. Sigur seemed to have emerged from the ruins with that beautiful horse, surviving the destruction created by his father. And that was like reproaching him for his action.

His son was now in front of him, looking at him with her beautiful clear eyes and her hair sticking out from under her white cap. The bear skin covered his shoulders, but in front of him a series of ties crossed his chest, and on his waist, a goatskin belt.

-How did you sleep, father?

He did not expect the irony of his son, just the resentment that he had already accepted. But behind him was the landscape of desolation, and he could not deny that it was his work. He wasn't going to answer her, however.

Sigur continued to stare at him, insisting on an answer.

Saying yes or no was remembering the night and the sleeplessness, the collapse of the houses, it was the same as recognizing the impotence of sleep in the face of the remorse that he had tried to silence by listening to the crackling of the fire. Tol's expression hardened. He wasn't going to give in, not even with his son, this time.

Then he heard another voice. Sigur was talking to him, he saw his lips move, but it was not the voice of his son. She came from somewhere else, very far away, because she was soft and sweet, above all desolate and sad.

His son's lips stopped moving, but the voice continued. It was a kind of wind that had crossed a distance greater than the known world. Weak and exhausted, perhaps, but whose tenderness had not been lost either with the harshness of time or distance.

A gust crossed the ship's deck and buckled the sails. The men shouted warning. Then the wind stopped. Tol had seen the bear hairs move in that wind, but they continued to sway even after it had passed and the air was still, heavy and empty. Intense heat had covered the ship and the entire port.

Sigur looked at his father with the same docile and at the same time judging expression. Some birds crossed the sky. The candles were motionless, as if dead.

Tol heard the voice again, louder this time, coming from Sigur's body. And suddenly he knew that he was wrong. It didn't come from inside his son, not even from his mouth, but from the bear skin. The hairs swayed continuously despite the absence of the wind. His son didn't even move a finger of her hand in front of his chest.

Then Tol looked better, and saw that the movement of the fur formed figures. First two circles, then a third, more elongated, like a mouth.

It was a face. And he was talking to her.

The voice was a woman's song. It was born from the skin that sheltered Sigur.

Tol remembered the voice that he thought he had forgotten after so many years.

Sulla's voice sang, lulling his son. Long before the world and its tragedies dragged them down. When Tol was still young and he trusted in the happiness that life would bring him.

Sulla's voice was a lullaby that made you sleep. The warm, soft voice that had caressed him when they were married, the one that kissed his beard in the bed in which they slept for the first time. The breath condensing in drops on the open lips.

She talked to him, and she seemed to force him to sleep. But he didn't want the dream or the nightmares from him.

"Don't talk!" Tol said, as quietly as possible so that the others wouldn't hear him. He contained the pain that suddenlyHe squeezed his chest and held on to Sigur's arms, who looked at him almost indifferent and cold.

-But I'm not talking to you, father.

Tol didn't hear him. Sulla's voice grew louder and she waved the candles. It was now a wind that blew the caps and ropes off the masts. A wind that dried the morning sweat on the men's backs.

The wordless singing had grown loud and shrill, almost a scream for moments, and was overflowing from the ship into the waters.

"Speak no more!" Tol shouted, and his face wrinkled painfully and with more sorrow than terror.

He was holding his son's arm, looking at the sea. The echo of the voice receded, dispersing along the entire coast of what remained of the Northern Village. Sulla's song, her shrill cry, seemed like a group of women in grief crying since before the beginning of time, because the tone of anguish was heavier than what time drags, it was inconsolable.

But the voices also came from the beach, and they joined one another until they began to ascend towards the clouds, separated by that strange wind that the sounds produced.

The morning light had turned white, it shone and shone on the surface of the sails and the hulls of the ships, beaten by the waves increased by the wind.

The columns of smoke from the town had leaned towards the sea, like pillars that bent without collapsing, supporting the sky that seemed to be falling on them all.

Sulla's song dominated land, sea and sky, covering the things of the world like a penetrating substance that petrified as it dried.

And then the song became so intense and rigid that it sank into the sea, like an immense stone born in the air.

The ships are leaving. The waves hitting the hard wooden hull. The foam jumps and accumulates on the deck. It disappears when it seeps to the

bottom, or dries out, leaving a slime of salt that eats away at the wood. The algae grow, forming a dark green spectrum, soft to the caresses of men. Calloused hands hardly feel anymore. They close their eyes and caress the moss, as if they were touching the breasts of a dry woman, no longer young, but a woman nonetheless.

They close their eyelids and see the body under their bodies. The boat is a large female that can be caressed in every crevice. The wind cleanses their faces of sweat, clears the hair from their foreheads, and they feel the hand of the sun that touches them with broken fingers and nails. But it is the sun, after all.

It is the sea where time can be forgiven, because it is merciful, because it does not seem to pass. Where the wind still passes and disappears, and brushes against them again without premeditation, without the idea of day or night as times that follow one another never to return. Today can also be tomorrow, and there is no shame or rush in that. There is no anguish of the night that comes, of the bottomless darkness into which the ship sinks, of the abyss with which the sky envelops the sea.

The sea is then an accomplice of the men who sail in the fragile ships. Rock the boats as if they were cradles where children sleep or dream with their eyes open. The men let themselves go, and look at the sky.

The noise of the oars, rising and falling. The sound of water in your ears, the taste of salt in your mouth, the harsh salt that scrapes your sunburned forehead. And the skin exists, the body lives, and men know that they could die in that moment, without regret. They are a part of the world that has come to find them. The fragile elements that shape the shapes of the world. They open their eyes and see the clouds that are slowly growing. White, then darker until they became black, immense, joining one another like faceless monsters from beyond the sea. From the edge of the world where the world is lost and falls into the unknown, perhaps into nothingness. Lightning flashes, and the masts sway with the impulse of the strongest wind.

They have ordered the sails to be lowered. The oars work with less force. The sea is rough. High waves invade the deck. But it's not dark yet. It's mid afternoon. Fog rises from the surface, enveloping the ships. The opaque clarity is transformed into lost shapes without contours. Seagulls pass by, fast, blind, and collide with the masts. They fall to the deck and the men keep them as reserves. Someone lights a torch and advances with it very close to the candles. They yell at him to turn it off if he doesn't want to set the boat on fire.

The storm has stopped. The sea is calm. The fog weighs on the waters. It's really hot. The men sweat and wait. They know that the storm will come. They think about those who will fall overboard, about whether the ships will be able to resist.

At midnight, when nothing can be seen except the watchman's oil lamp at the height of the mainmast, like a solitary star, the has been rocking for some time before. The lightning illuminates them, and their faces seem pale even though they are not, they seem tense even though they want to pretend that is not the case. The explosions from the sky bare the souls of men.

Rains so hard. The candles, even though they have been gathered, soak up water and drip like waterfalls. One, two lightning bolts in a row explode, far away, and the waves hit, punish with ferocity. Shouted orders can be heard from one end of the ships to the other. Signals from the lanterns from one to another, cut by the rain and lightning. The ship lurches sideways. To leeward, the storm rages dangerously. They are inclined, and the water accumulates to windward. Several are in charge of removing it with buckets, but they know that it is useless work. The bottom has been flooded, some say.

A mast falls to the deck. The break of the wood has sounded muffled by the wind. They run to look. There are two, maybe more bodies under the mast. You can hardly see in the darkness that the lanterns cannot control. They turn off constantly. They will then have to endure the night and the storm like blind men. Only guided by the intermittency of lightning. But these are less frequent. The rain is the worst, it hits mercilessly. And the wind doesn't let up.

The men know that many have fallen into the water, but they do not see them. They hear their screams as they get lost in the foam of the big waves. The faint whiteness carries them away like a cloud of bone dust. They know that the dead shine in the night, that the bones sweat, and the fluid that the bodies become floats in the waters like oil with its own shine.

However, they will have to hold out until morning.

And at dawn, there are no traces of a storm. The six ships have survived, although one has been left tilted, and others with their masts fallen.

Reports of the damage come from ship to ship through the light signals of lookouts or men traveling the distance in boats. Twenty men are missing. Masts and sails will have to be rebuilt and refitted. The horses are sick, but they recover. The provisions of the most damaged ship have been flooded. In the distance, from the first boat, they see how the last one throws the waste into the sea. From the other ships, they have also begun to throw some bodies.

The sun is intense, and it burns. It's not cold. Some sew broken sails, others hammer, others row. The ships, one after the other, sail over calm, blue waters, under a cloudless sky. Behind them, like the tail of a tired animal, the last boat lumbers forward, leaning to windward. His men can be seen walking cautiously, as they continue to draw water throughout the day.

They wait for the sun to dry the covers. A smell of rot, sweet and sour at the same time, swirls around the ships. The smell of rainwater on the debris, on the ruined fabrics, on the corpses that float around and move away very slowly.

The heat, however, will transform it, and the wind, which will arrive in the afternoon, will bring the usual aroma, the aroma of salt.

And that day and the next were similar to those that followed. A stormy summer. A more peaceful autumn, and at the beginning of winter, the cold settled on the decks. The frost shattered with a sound like crows cawing. The wood of the hulls creaked as if about to break.

There was hunger among the men, and some horses died every morning. An epidemic took over one of the ships and many men and animals died. The ship was isolated at the end of the fleet.

But one day a scream was heard from the watchmast, which was repeated in the six ships.

-Land!

The men's gaze was filled with light.

*

He had seen the ships since two days before, when they were just two black dots on the line that separated the sea from the sky. At night, especially, a very faint light could be seen flickering, like a fallen star struggling not to sink.

Then, two days later, when Cesius emerged from his shelter among the rocks on the beach that morning, he no longer saw two black dots, but ships whose sails were bending in the wind, resplendent despite the frayed edges and the dirt that covered them. The movement of the oars made them sway like the movement of a caterpillar. They were small ships still in the distance, but behind the first ones other points appeared, straggling behind. Three, maybe, or more if he paid closer attention. Maybe it was the shadows of the waves contrasting with the intense brightness of the sun on the water.

However, he had no doubts about the first ones. He sat on the rocks to clean and cut the fish that his nets caught that morning. Every time he entered the sea, his eyes were lost in contemplation of the ships, which seemed so still and serene, that they were almost a response to what he had been dreaming of in recent times.

dSince the death of his father and brother, and Britan's flight, he only had to hide. He didn't know how long that life would last, but it didn't bother him too much to think that he would live like this forever. As long as the new village chief didn't look for him, he would manage to survive if they left him alone. His days would not be different from those he had already spent, alone, apart from his people, composing songs that he recited for his solitude, for the moon that sometimes decided to accompany him on sleepless nights. Words for the voices of the water, the river or the place where he lived. Words for the roof that covered him, the stones, the earth or the branches that sheltered him. For the fish that fed it, the air and the wind that refreshed the night sweat. Only thinking and talking to himself consoled him.

For a long time now, the explanations he had given for his brothers' disagreement over his voluntary isolation had been worthless. They had invited him to be part of the destiny of the town. His father, the man who spoke with the gods, however never reproached him for that. He let him go, knowing the aptitudes he had demonstrated since he was a child, when he would get up in the middle of the night and run naked through the trees, calling the moon his mother and the clouds his clothing. . Torn fabrics that he wanted to grab by extending his arms, climbing trees, to tear them from the sky and protect himself from the cold. Every morning they went to look for him to take him down from the branches where he had fallen asleep, his arms and legs dangling, his head and body resting on the bark.

As he grew up, that search turned into fever and discouragement. His steps were heavier and slower, an uncertain and meaningless phrase came from his lips. The sweat ran down his body and he dried himself against the trunks in which he sought peace from the impetus of his sex. He no longer woke up, exhausted, on a tree branch, but he was still asleep when Britan came to look for him. Cesius then murmured the same broken phrases that he had uttered without interruption that night, like a growing wave of words that were a force in themselves, asking to destroy the forest with the intensity of their meaning, to transform it into sky. Make the clouds arrive, or scare them away like you kick loose stones. Convert the world to his will for one night. To live in another place than this, the one before the day when others would appropriate the land and come with the ropes of reason.

But the winters attenuated the inconsistent myriad of opposing forces that tormented him, fighting for his body as if he were the prey of higher spirits. He no longer ran naked through the forest, but covered in light fabrics that the old women of the town wove for him with fine strands of plum leaves, walking barefoot on the ivy, without waiting for the moon to rise. He called her with her songs, the same ones that did not arise spontaneously, but rather thought about and retained in memory throughout the day. The sun or the rain seemed to dictate those words to them, and he adorned them with others that enhanced the beauty of those

attempts that the everyday world failed to convey. He was the instrument, the voice that gave order to the chaos of the world.

That's why Reynod, his father, had left him alone. Because knowing his aptitude, he seemed to rest sometimes on his youngest son. What purity his old will still had, the sad innocence of the voices of the gods that he heard, of their most remote origin, persisted in Cesius. They weren't voices then, they were words of beauty tinged with melancholy. The words of the gods that his father had managed to transmit to the people with brutal force, like an order without a hint of mercy, were songs in the voice of Cesius.

He knew it. But since the death of his father, the songs, the epics that he created and were accumulating in his memory, became dark omens. The songs were beautiful, but sad. Immense, although they ended in meaningless sentences. Long songs that ended up killing themselves, and yet he couldn't erase them from his memory.

Carrying the nets on his shoulders, with his back to the sea, the words came with the waves and were impregnated into the sand. And he read them, pronouncing them aloud. The water spoke to him of ships, ships that he had decided to ignore, but when he looked back they were still there, a little larger, resistant not only to the force of the sea, but to the fragility of memory, to the weak resistance of the view of a simple man. The noise of the waves gave rhythm to the songs of the ships.

But Cesius saw more than that, he could see other waters and a barge whose shadow he could not completely distinguish, and it disturbed him. The image of the boat was the most important thing on this summer day, as it dropped the nets and fish on the beach. The hands are calloused, with dark hair on the back of the fingers. standingthe golden one, darkened by the sun. The body bent over, the legs bent, the ankles resting on the hot sand. Her hands opening the entrails of the fish, with the sun falling on her back. The view sometimes looked up towards the waters, watching the slow growth of the ships as the afternoon wore on, at the same rate as the light decreased and the cold intensified. Then the small distant lights became strong stars reflected by the sea.

Five ships, and another still far off in the distance.

At night, she threw water on the bonfire. The ash rose with a cloud of smoke until it became nothing more than a grayish layer that blended into the darkness. Beyond, the western and northern border was always illuminated by guards with torches, day and night, against the dangers that could come from there. Zaid's way of ruling was different from that of the witcher. Reynod had made them migrate from region to region, like a pack of men who did not accept new followers or dissent. They were a closed town but without barriers or fences, immutable in their number, in the purity of the castes that formed it.

But the town of Zaid was a place with barriers of fire and water. Limits always illuminated by flashes. Even the sky also formed a barrier of black clouds. Outside it radiated luminosity, but inside a growing blackness grew. He could see it from his shelter, from the wave-beaten rocks. The valley, in the distance, seemed to sink into the mud that the lake was forming in its incessant advance.

On this night of moonless stars, Cesius looked towards the sea, and saw the lights of the ships, which little by little began to turn towards where he was, perhaps avoiding approaching the illuminated beaches. He decided to wait for them. The air was warm. Near the shore, the breeze brought him drops of the waves that were breaking nearby, within reach of his hands. He could only make out the whiteness of the foam, beyond which the lights of the ships were increasing. There were now six ships clearly visible, at a great distance from each other. On the deck of the nearest one you could see the movement of men, small as ants. Dots moving under and over the masts and crossbars, like ants on the branches of the ship. They were floating trees that came from unknown lands.

He was watching them all night. He saw how the boats were lowered and the men descended with suppressed shouts and almost whispered orders that he could not hear. The lamps had been turned off to the minimum necessary. Despite being so close, they looked distant like fireflies suspended a few feet above the sea, or similar to those fish whose bodies shine when jumping in the moonlight at night.

Dawn was beginning. The mist had settled over the water, but the pale figures of the lamps made their way through the mist, bobbing in the boats. The small boats rocked with the waves of the breakers. The first ones were emerging, born from the shapeless mass of the fog. Points of weak light that became men and oars, men and wood. Men's voices that trembled in hoarse throats of humidity and fatigue.

When the first boat passed the surf, it ran aground on the sand. It was almost daylight, but the mist hid the crew. Only one could be distinguished with some clarity, a tall figure, with broad shoulders, covered in dark fur. In one hand he carried a raised torch. In the other, a spear. But Cesius did not see his face. Two more boats arrived later, and there would be ten that would run aground throughout the morning. A flock of storks crossed the sky in search of food, but the strange activity of that day made them continue past without stopping.

The man who had gone down first sank his feet into the wet sand, and accompanied by others approached where he was, but they did not seem to have seen him. They looked towards the beach and the rocks.

Cesius did not dare call them. Despite his peculiar meekness and lack of distrust of men, these who now arrived from the sea induced fear in him. The mist opened as they walked, tearing into wisps of heavy white vapor,

leaving beads of sweat on their faces. He could see faces covered in perspiration, which they wiped with the backs of their hands. Their gray figures, with spearheads and shields in front of their chests, appeared a few feet from Cesius. Then he no longer knew how to evade them, even if he had wanted to or had time to decide if they were good or bad based on their appearance. Now that they were in front of him, he saw the leader, who was wearing a helmet made of bison hooves, and on his face a bitter look of weariness.

-Are you from the town? -The stranger asked him not only in his own language, but with the identical accent of his people. The others, behind, exchanged glances, with their weapons in a visibly stance. gilante

Cesius thought he perceived a distrustful gesture in the principal's voice, hoarse and worn. There were black spots under his eyes, perhaps after many days without sleep. He looked at her feet, swollen and ulcerated.

"Yes," he answered. "But I don't live with the others." The beach is my home.

"Why?" the other asked again.

"Because I want it that way," she said, and took an arrogant posture, strange for him, which betrayed his fear. He wanted to believe that the man, now somewhat old, did not have as much strength as his height demonstrated.

-Your name!

-Cesius.

-From what family?

"Who's asking?" He defended himself.

The other seemed to get tired of that game, and with a gesture he made his men arrest him. While two were holding his arms, Cesius smelled the smell of rancid fish, of dirt accumulated in his long, curly hair. Who knew how long they had been sailing, or how long they had not eaten or drank.

The chief took off his helmet, and his graying hair fell over his shoulders. His face was strong, firm in its contours. His head lifted proudly, and his lips parted. A trickle of blood ran down the scabs on his lips.

-Tol, son of Zor the Hunter. If you've been taught anything, you'll know who I'm talking about.

Cesius had heard about that family from his father, who spoke of his disobedience, of how old Zor had rebelled against his laws, only to be expelled from the town. But above all he knew what he himself knew: the arrival of Zaid.

-If you come to see your son, you won't find him here. Wherever he is, I must flee.

Tol's gaze left the faint reverie in which they seemed to have fallen for a moment. For the first time he saw him really open his eyes, as if he hadn't woken up since he had left the ship. Light brown eyes, pale white orbits that contrasted like clouds within a tornado of black earth.

-What are you talking about?

-Your son Zaid is the leader of our people, a tyrant who does not allow the burial of the dead.

He looked west, as if he could see beyond the rocks that hid the valley. He nodded, asking to be released. Tol agreed. Then Cesius walked to the highest rock, and they followed him.

The wind carried the clouds that spread over the sea and the valley. The sweat dried from his faces, and the men made gestures of relief at the cool wind. All eyes were directed towards the valley. Cesius pointed to the black spot that covered the southern half.

-The lake is invading them, and every night it grows a little more. Look at the clouds.-Her gaze rose from him to the dark mass in the sky.-It's summer, but the clouds never part.

Tol still didn't understand the cause or Zaid's relationship to all this. Suddenly, he felt a sting in his legs, and he had to sit down. The others helped him, tying up Cesius first. More men climbing the rocks. One came to help Tol. He had red hair, which fell tangled on his back. He wore a finer skin than Tol, a skin that had once been white.

-Father!

Tol looked up and made Sigur kneel next to him. He took him by the arm, trembling. His face had transformed into an expectant expression of anxiety. The bags under his eyes disappeared, and he rubbed his face and beard as he spoke.

"Your brother is here," he said, repeating the phrase several times, as if he wanted to convince himself. "We must talk to him, it is no longer necessary to fight." Zaid is the head of the village.

Sigur made a gesture of confusion at the change of plans. He looked at the one they had captured and asked for an explanation.

"Your son is a tyrant," said Cesius, serene, without hatred in his voice, while Tol watched him suspiciously.

"I'm not afraid of that," said Tol.

Sigur looked at him resentfully, but the old man seemed to breathe admiration behind the paleness of his eyes.

-I have been, and so have you. Don't say that you dragged all your men along just because of their will. If your actions don't make you a tyrant, your words do.

Sigur looked down.

"We need orders," said one of the men.

-Form a barricade on this edge of the valley, with a permanent guard. Then, build a dock to lower the corpses and the men.-Tol took a deep breath and took a deep breath.-And for all the gods who have not wanted to help us, look for food and water!

The men left, and a few stayed with them.

"Where is Reynod?" Sigur asked.

-My father died last fall.

Cesius noticed how the others looked at each other, surprised.

-Don't worry about me, I know the hatred between our families, and I don't share it. My father raised me different from my brothers. I'm not talking about resentments, but about songs. My family has fallen apart, you see. I am the only one left, and my strength is a voice as fragile as it is. you the sea breeze.

"He is lying," said Tol to Sigur. "Zaid cannot be what he says." If he is the boss, he achieved it through his merits. He remembers that he must have suffered as much or more than us.

But Sigur seemed to want more explanations. He left his father and went to Cesius. He punched her in the side.

-You're lying! How can my brother be a tyrant?!

Cesius remained silent while he recovered. He vomited blood and then spoke.

-Each one is one and many. Sometimes, we don't even choose which of our faces will prevail over time.

Father and son looked at each other. The wind had blown away the fog, and the ships then emerged like great mountains lying on the sea. The bows, swaying by the waves, had broken wood. Some masts leaned on each other or on the gunwale, and the sails hung broken from the crossbars. Columns of smoke rose from the decks, and a swarm of men moved from one place to another busy with their tasks. But in their movements you

could see the same fatigue, the reluctance that was in those who had disembarked.

Several more boats began to be lowered into the water. The men descended the ropes with bundles of tools and weapons, and moved slowly towards the coast. First there were ten, then perhaps forty or fifty who brought about twenty men each. And from the boats they continued descending throughout that day.

Cesius saw from the top of the cliff the boats arriving and the men descending to gather around their leaders. Tol followed that process with his eyes, already recovered from the pain in his legs. A man was treating the sores on his feet.

-This air will improve it, Sir, it is drier. The sand is clean.

"I know, my friend," Tol answered, leaning on the other's shoulders, without his eyes losing sight of what was happening on the beach.

Sigur remained apart and with his head down, lost in sad thoughts. He had his good hand under the bearskin, in front of his chest. He was playing, perhaps, with something he was hiding. Then he took out his hand with two black feathers. Cesius, sitting on the ground and now free of restraints but with the guards' gaze fixed on him, watched Sigur play with the feathers between his fingers. He couldn't tell if his lips were murmuring something as he moved, because he couldn't hear them. But he was sure he saw them blowing on the feathers and kissing them, caressing their own cheeks with them, and then he put them back under his coat. He didn't seem to care that anyone was watching him. Cesius was curious to see a man of those characteristics showing such sensitivity. He had imagined that the new arrivals were strong, with hardened souls, whose arms had been made only to carry spears and wield daggers.

They stopped paying attention to him for the rest of that day, except to offer him food, which he refused. From the cliff, he saw the men undress and bathe in the sea. Their bodies were thin: the shoulder bones stuck out like the tips of masts and the ankles like the ends of diseased stumps. The bosses favored the strongest, feeding them first. At noon, the hunters returned with quite a few game, which they all pounced on without waiting for them to cook over the fire. Afterwards, the enthusiasm for the food waned. The hunger had been satisfied, and a languid heaviness lulled them to sleep, even the chiefs and Tol himself. He had eaten and drank fresh water, had gotten rid of his dirty clothes, to lie in the afternoon sun, whose lukewarm warmth was different from that of the deep sea.

It took five days to build the docks. More than two hundred men had taken the beach. Nearly half of them stood guard in front of the valley, and Cesius could hear the reports they brought to Tol. Although they were not

hiding, the townspeople did not seem to have seen them, the messengers said. Only the night fires were more numerous, and they never went out. It was as if they sensed its presence, the barrier that surrounded the valley from which they could not leave. Not because they prevented it, but because of something that perhaps pushed them more than the presence of the newcomers. Maybe it was that lake near the center of the valley, those waves of gray foam that glistened in the moonlight. But the guards had seen that the moon never shone past midnight. The clouds were becoming denser, almost impenetrable to any ray of light. Only the mornings were tinged orange, in a faint change from the usual harshness of their appearance.

"It's strange that Zaid hasn't sent representatives," Tol said when he heard them.

"He's up to something," Cesius told him. "The woman he brought with him and the dead people in the lake are part of his plan."

-Shut up!

-When you are ready, I will take you to see the valley, to hear the voices of the people and the faces on the pilluminates Each of us carries two dead bodies on our faces. Ours and the one we have had to carry in life. If you heard the voices of the dead in the water, the waves with sounds like screams! And in the distance, barely noticeable, in the right center of the lake, is the boat!

-Shut up!

-…the boat!

Tol hit him several times. The guards surrounded Cesius, but there was nothing he could do to stand up or threaten them. Only the words that he couldn't pronounce, and yet they seemed to be written on the bruised face.

On the fifteenth day, the ships approached the completed docks, which extended into the sea like two large hands to hold the ships. Many more men came down then. Those who were sick were carried on boards or the remains of broken candles. A long line of women followed them, each holding several children by the hand.

Then, almost before dusk, the horses appeared. The roar of hooves on the docks echoed throughout the beach. Clouds of sand rose and paled the already dark blue of the summer sky. The men guided them with whips to make them form two columns that occupied the entire width of the docks. When they reached the beach, they gathered in packs between the cliffs.

Cesius had never seen animals like these, but their strange beauty, the colors of the fur after the dust, and especially the tones of twilight on their backs, made him leave the tent and stand there, at the edge of the rocks, to contemplate them.

The ships were disappearing in a shadow that came from the sea and drowned in ocher tones the lights of the oil lamps that accompanied the landing of the tarpans. Suddenly, he saw an animal with red hair, with long, messy manes. He seemed slightly taller than the others, although the robustness of his body and legs made him similar to the rest. The horse ran with the others along the pier. The pillars shook more than at the beginning. Some men shouted orders to stop. The screams were lost in the general noise, and the sand barely showed the movements of the arms indicating where they should be guided.

The ships swayed more than before with the tide, relieved by the weight that had occupied them until then. The red horse was one of the last to leave. They were going slower, perhaps more tired. The drops of sweat could not be hidden even under the dust and sand. They shone in the shifting light of the swinging lamps hanging on the sides of the dock.

The sun, hidden in the middle of its sphere, formed a long path over the waters, almost touching the beach. The late heat made the horses sweat, but the sea breeze ran like a breath of fresh air along the coast. The same wind that hit Cesius's face was the one that ran his rough hands over the tarpan's back. And it was then that he thought he felt that the animal was looking at him.

At first it was doubt, then the certainty that the horse had fixed its gaze on him, among so many men. The tarpan began to ride a little more serenely, not worrying when the other horses hit him as they passed. Not even the whips caught his attention. It was coming straight towards him, still very far away, but as if it were looking for a shorter path through the crowd. At the foot of the cliffs, a sea of clouds preceded the true sea, and making its way through them, the tarpan rode with its red mane flapping in the breeze.

But a horse and a rider stood in the way, and a noose went around his neck. Cesius couldn't make out who he was, then he saw the man's white cap and red hair. He turned around and saw that they had left him alone. Sigur must have come down from the cliff during the afternoon, to help the men and horses descend, and it was he who was now trying to catch the animal. And without knowing why, if he had never had anything of his own or held on to things in his entire life, Cesius felt that something was being taken from him.

Nothing that the new arrivals brought interested him, nor did he long to possess the large ships, nor the weapons or the women that he had seen descending from the ships. He didn't even want the skill they showed in

building docks and organizing all those preparations. He knew they were more intelligent and advanced, there was no doubt. But that horse was different. It wasn't about the need to own him, nor the satisfaction of seeing him grazing in front of his hut every morning and waiting for him to take him riding. He had the feeling that if he lost sight of that horse, the very idea of the future, the essential assurance that tomorrow, or two days or a winter later, he would disappear. And that made him feel like he was on the edge of an abyss. The restlessness transformed into a tingling running through his body, his heart fluttering and hiswet forehead. Then she could no longer stay there, and from the cliff down the nearest descent.

Running and stumbling, she managed to reach the beach. Some women interrupted his path. When he emerged from the path between the rocks, the herds had become denser than they had appeared from above. He could see, however, Sigur riding alongside the red horse, which obeyed him, but the animal turned its head and was looking at Cesius. Three men approached Sigur to help him with the herd.

Cesius forced his way through the flanks of the tarpans. He walked slowly towards the horse Sigur was leading towards the center of the beach. The tide had risen and there was very little free space. When he finally caught up with them, he only then remembered the guards that he had not seen and must have followed him since he started going down. But it didn't matter anymore. The tarpan stirred, broke free of its snare, and began to run toward him. They were facing each other, looking at each other. The animal was sweating, contrasting its shine with the opaque sand that covered it. Cesius raised his arms and wrapped them around the tarpan's neck, resting his head on its snout.

The others watched in amazement. The other animals continued passing by, but the men stopped their task to look at what they did not understand.

-Sir!-one said to Sigur.-Your horse!

Sigur did not answer. Cesius had listened, and fear was reflected in his eyes. If the horse belonged to Tol's son, he would never get it.

-How do you know this animal?

So he had no choice but to tell the truth, although lying would have been less absurd in this case.

"I don't know him," he replied. He had to scream to continue speaking. Although the tumult of the trots was diminishing, the bustle of the people had increased due to hunger. The bonfires began to be lit, and children cried around them. What he began to say made no sense, as his nocturnal songs never did.

-You own what you don't own. You see the sun, and you don't have it. But the sun breeds on your skin and your insides. You eat sun, you spit sun,

because it is in your body. You touch the grass you eat, but you actually taste your own lips. The sun on your tongue, the tongue that eats itself and chews the insides of your being. You own everything if it's in your body, but you don't own anything at the end of the day. You must return it, just as you return bodies to the earth.

A bonfire had been lit next to Tol's tent. Cesius continued petting the animal while he spoke.

-Even if you don't know something, you know it because it is in the body. The blood is the same here and at the ends of the world. And the blood speaks. Blood is time. Without time there is no blood or death. The three are the same thing, independent lives that feed on each other. Blood. Death. Time. Executioners of reason and sanity. I'm not talking about peace, because it doesn't matter. The only interest, like a raft in a river or in the sea, is knowledge. The knowledge that saves us, that delays the bite of time that stuns us with the idea of what cannot be possessed. That's what I mean. We have nothing and we have it, however, in the body, laughing at us. Looking at us from within with a hateful smile. So small we can't catch it, so strong it can destroy us. This is what I want to explain. I've finally found it. Future.

He caressed the horse, now serene and submissive. Sigur made a gesture of boredom, perhaps of disappointment. The horse had never been so obedient and devoted as this time, not even when caught in the northern lands.

-Let him take him! -He ordered, and he rode away quickly and without looking back, towards where his father was waiting for him.

*

He removed his hand from his father's body. The old man had stopped breathing. He brought his face close to her lips. Not a soft breath that betrayed life. Just the smell of old age. Darkened skin. The beard between the wrinkles of his face, folds that marked the appearance of the illness that had consumed him.

If the old man had remained on his feet until a short time before, if he went to the battlefield, in the rear, to observe the results, if he still remained attentive, despite the pain in his ears, during the meetings to define strategies, It was by the force of his unbreakable, firm, and harder will than ever. Only, Aristid told himself, to see how the rebels resisted after the first defeats. Battles lost or suspended for reasons they did not understand. They faced different enemies. Once one died, another appeared who was even stranger. And in the form of familiarity, with the face of a friendly family, a

new man had arrived for something that they could not understand. They only saw in Zaid a new strategy of tyranny. The old craftsman knew that the important thing was to fight, but he had stoppedto see the people, to hear the cries for those not buried. She stopped smelling the scent of corpses from the lake. If he had not done so, he would not have had the will to continue fighting.

And now they were taking him away. The same smell that they had always tried to keep away with fires and incense, grew in the bed where the body rested. He added more fuel to the fire, and the light increased, scaring away the shadows that the same flames caused between the old man's clothes and hair. He looked for spices and grains among the bundles leaning against the wall, to also throw them into the flames. An intense aroma filled the place. So strong, that it seemed to be a mockery, an imitation of the smell of death. Aristid looked for oils, and spread them over the body. The smell became sweeter. But as he approached his father's face again, he opened the old man's mouth, and felt the unmistakable perfume of emptiness, like muffled screams in the dark mouth.

That's why he brutally tore off the blankets and covered his entire body and face with them, with quick fury, without paying attention to the rites that the others, looking at him, seemed to be reproaching him for not fulfilling. He paused for a moment, looking for something around him that he couldn't find. They approached him and touched his shoulder. He looked at them, and his fists, gripping the blankets, loosened. He put his hands to his face, and smelled the same aroma that nothing could make disappear. Then he abandoned his father in the care of the others, and went out.

It was night. His men passed by carrying bodies and weapons. The lives of his people had been disrupted in a continuous attentive gaze towards the lake suspended from the sky. As more days passed, the rebels trapped in the ambush died without being able to do anything but resist. They didn't even fight. Reynod was dead, the eldest son was dead, and the other two were missing. And the man who was supposed to be his ally was his enemy.

Father, if you leave now, I won't be able to find the solution. I don't know what to do, father. That smell overcomes me. I don't even have the desire to fight, because the enemy has no face. He has, yes, the face of a friend who is not faithful. And you can't kill that face, because it would be like killing me. I don't know him and yet he is your best friend's grandson. It is our blood, father, and that cannot be killed. In him I recognize a force that is consuming me without having seen or touched it. It's that smell that is in my hands, and sometimes I also smell it on the nights when I can't sleep. Zaid's image invades everything. The aromas that follow and surround him, the darkness of the lake and the sky around him. I want to go in there, father, because you are going in. It's a serene place, I know. The entrance is the noseless face, consumed by mud.

Aristid's knees had sunk into the mud. He stood up when he saw a light advancing rapidly towards him, swinging in the darkness like a firefly flying in circles, growing until it illuminated the face of the messenger.

"Sir!" said the voice of the young man without a beard, thin and short. Little older than a child, he must have been only a few winters older than his own son.

"Sir!" He repeated panting, but he couldn't say more with his dry throat.

Aristid gave him a drink from the barrel next to the tent. The young man then sighed deeply, and knelt down.

-What were you going to tell me?

-Mister! The leader of the northern group sends word that ships have arrived to the coast, with hundreds of men and animals. It's been two days since they docked. I ran as fast as I could, sir. Another group follows me and will arrive in three days.

At that moment a star crossed the sky, quickly and brightly. But Aristide no longer believed in the infallibility of the gods, but more than anything in his infinite cruelty.

An omen of bliss? No! Surely, the gods use the stars to deceive us like children, like this young man who still believes in the things of that other world. But when I see a star, I see the gods put on their mask of piety. The mask loosens easily with the smile that forms beneath it. The smile that the naivety of men causes them.

-Go warm yourself by the fire and sleep. Tell the others that I command you. My wife and my son will give you shelter and food.

The young man left, without first forgetting to kiss her hand. Aristid didn't move from there all night. In the absence of priests, he had to accept the help of elders who had known his father since they were young. He saw the old men and their children, warriors who had endured the rigor of hunger and resistance for a long time, enter and leave. The same ones who had abandoned their posts for a while when they received the message of the death of the great weapons craftsman. The leader of the rebels. Perhaps they cried, or closed their eyes for a moment before making their way to the old man's tent. They were arriving one after another, in a long line that Aristid greeted with extreme modesty and withpride. She barely parted her lips to utter an almost silent thank you. Men came and went all night. The old people leaned on the arms of their children. Dawn found them in the same routine, but there were more who entered than those who left. Many had decided to keep a vigil over the body for three days, as was customary, even though there were no priests to perform the rites.

"Many of us are purer than those who call themselves noble men and have betrayed us," said a friend of his father.

-Men who can bury a dead person as it should be done. Men who will not dishonor the memory of the dead by dirtying the bodies with treacherous hands. Few men, like your father or old Zor, who are no longer with us.

-And it is his grandson who contradicts him now! -Aristid said.

-That's right, but our goal is not to get revenge. Remember what has kept us strong since the times when we saw Zor's first attempts to contradict Reynod. Open the town to the world. Breathe the air of other peoples, the teachings and freedoms of which we were deprived here as if we did not deserve them. We were plunged into ignorance for more than forty winters, some accepting it, others hiding the knowledge as an evil or a disease. Oh, son! -the old man lamented, raising his hands. -I remember the bonfires and the sacrifices. The blind devotion to the Witcher, which he subjected us to with his prayers, prayers to the gods, his ointments and cures.

Aristid wanted to console him with a hug, and they moved away into the fog, far from the store so that no one would see him cry. But many had heard his lamentations, and murmured among themselves in a subdued tone of anger and grief.

-Trust, old friend, that we will defeat them. Our task is to survive, not just liberate the people. Those who have stayed there perhaps do not deserve to be saved. But I think of us, of my son and of the children in the boat drifting on the lake. Those delivered. And I can't stand the fury that grows in my chest when I think of them.

The old man's eyes opened wider, clear and dry, just like the sun that morning that was clearing of fog. Not even a cloud littered the horizon, where, towards the north, the pale points of the straggling stars disappeared.

-It dawns. We must start the funerals.

As the old man left, surrounded by his two sons, Aristid told them that the next meeting would be that night in his store. He came back in, his body was anointed with oil and covered with aromatic herbs. The smell of death had finally subsided. The fire glowed on the naked, contracted, thin-limbed corpse. Only the head seemed large, with the white halo of curly, still upright hair. And he couldn't help but feel anguish, a shudder in his throat. But he showed no emotion.

He walked to the bunk, knelt and prayed. The others, although it was not the custom at the time when the rites had just begun, imitated it. The line of warriors who wanted to say goodbye and remained outside had to resign themselves to waiting for the procession to leave. Then he made his way

among them, and they threw spices at him. In front, Aristid was holding his son's hand. His wife, dressed in white, followed them. Further back, a group of warriors formed two columns of twelve men. With their arms raised, they held a fine cloth taut, whose threads were transparent in the bright sun on the dead man's bed. The body swayed with the slow, irregular steps of the men on the mud. Large furrows remained from the rainy winter of the war, when the footprints of the warriors had formed pits and mounds under the constant drizzle. Once dry, the earth seemed to have petrified waves, small or large undulations and furrows that not even the torrid sun was able to break and turn into dust.

He liked those displays of affection, but Aristid felt alone. Even the hand of his son seemed distant to him, like a fallen branch that he had picked up, but that would never again be part of the original trunk, and there was a void left, an idea of loss.

Father is gone, and I am alone.

After traveling the distance between the tent and the first rocks where, far beyond, the men were trapped, waiting, resisting, the procession began to climb the staircase carved in the stone. His people had told him that it was a worthy place for an altar. Between two high walls, which were accessed through a gap in one of them, they found a rock bridge that joined them. The wind whistled between the walls like between the walls of an enormous snail. And as they climbed, the wind increased. The inclination of the stairs forced those carrying the body to make more efforts, sweating and ascending very slowly to check where they were placing their feet. They were groping on the rock that the eyes could not see because of the shadowbetween the walls. They no longer needed the protective cloth, so those who had carried it left their spears at the entrance and helped the others.

Aristid always continued ahead, carrying his son in his arms even though he was already a big boy. His wife walked without help, resting her hands on the stone walls. Those who fulfilled the function of priests threw spices towards those who were witnesses of the passage of the dead man. A stroke of sunlight illuminated Aristid's face. He and the boy covered their eyes. They were at the top, finally. As they got used to the light, they contemplated the landscape. Like concentric circles, first was the muddy surface where his men had settled. He could see the tents, the fires, the wounded and maimed who were waiting for the end of the war, knowing that they could no longer fight. It was a gray view, punctuated from time to time by bright bonfires that raised columns of smoke like fog, flooding the sky with a continuous and closed pallor. Beyond were the women and children, the elderly and the first huts where they lived. That was the world he was committed to defending. The only ones, among all the people to which he had belonged, who were faithful to the rebels. Behind the huts, one could see the black-green remains of the valley, some forests and

streams, and far away, to the east, the silhouetted figure of the Lost Mountains.

Aristid looked north. The lake seemed bigger than before. But he distinguished nothing from what they had told him: the rise of the waters to heaven.

Imagination and dream of tired warriors

But that undulating black surface frightened him. The banks advanced, curiously fast despite the apparent consistency of the waters, like mud sinking under its own weight, and yet it had the fluidity of a mountain river. Nearby, hidden beyond a forest, he managed to see the periphery of the town that Zor's grandson ruled.

The footsteps of the procession attracted his attention again. The men, sweaty and blinded by the sun, sighed deeply, paused for a moment, and continued. Some led them ahead towards the bridge to avoid the steep abyss. The sun was shining in their face, so they walked almost with their eyes closed. Aristid left his son with his mother, and before leaving him, he realized that the child was observing that process with ecstasy. Tal's eyes shone from the blinding light, perhaps from fear, from the dark pit between the walls below, where they would take Grandpa. Then the boy began to run, and he was able to grab him by the arm before his feet hit the void. The mother went up to them, scared and looking at both of them without understanding. Aristid held the child with difficulty while he resisted and hit his father's chest, continuing to scream and cry.

-Don't do it, father!

"Nothing bad is going to happen, son," he consoled him.

-Don't hand him over, father! The others are waiting for you!

"Who's waiting for him?" He asked, holding his son's face with one hand so she could look him in the eyes.

Her mother hugged them both, as if she felt that she could lose them both in the proximity of the dark well. The boy stared into his father's eyes, but he wasn't really looking at him. Aristid realized that he had looked further back, at a place lost in the distance. He turned around, and saw the gloom on the lake. He remembered the look on his son's face the day the children were put in the drifting boat. He kissed her forehead, making her rest her trembling head on his shoulder.

-Grandpa will be on the bridge for three days, and then the gods will take him with them.

His wife looked at him, grateful. She knew what he thought of the gods, the doubts that had slowly led him to consider nothingness as the essence

of the world. But there was no reason to give the child more grief, more than he already had.

Two nights passed, and Aristid looked at the arch of the bridge over the path between the shadowed rocks. The weak torches next to the body barely illuminated the guards. He could guess their rigid profiles, but their faces could not be seen, and perhaps their eyes were closed. The prayerwomen had also left, and only those men whose memories were more fleeting than the ever-renewed water of the rivers stood vigil over the remains.

Sleeping while watching over a dead person. Open your eyes from time to time to some nocturnal sound, and then rest again. But he could see them, at least their figures raised like trunks on that rough rock of strange shapes. A bridge that didn't connect anything important. That was the temporary grave of his father, as if his whole life deserved nothing more than that, a symbol of what he had done: fight, rebel. Make a bridge with his life that didn't unite anything.

The lights persisted, despite their weakness, and Aristid contemplated them from thetrada of his store almost seeing answers in them. From outside you could hear her son's delirium in a loud and sharp voice. His wife had begged him not to leave the child, who looked tired and nervous, and would no longer get out of his bed. Aristid feared for his life, but he could not forget the one waiting there on high either.

Two days passed, and the rites followed one another at a calm pace. He remembered Reynod's funeral, vast, full of pomp and with hundreds of men mourning the loss. Suddenly, he saw two clear dots moving on the path under the arch. Maybe it was the changing of the guard, but it wasn't time yet. He felt the footsteps of someone running towards him. A messenger appeared, panting.

-The men from the northern border are arriving, Sir.

"I expected it so," said Aristid. "Take the message to my second, and have him prepare a meeting immediately."

The other ran to carry out the order, and he entered the store to tell his wife. She looked at him sadly. His son had not slept for two days. He had his eyelids closed, but he was sweating and moving incessantly. Between his fists he clutched a cloth that his mother had given him to dry with.

-Grandpa... -he repeated-...they are waiting for you, grandfather. The children are waiting for you.

Aristid came out. He couldn't see his son like that. If he was going to die, he should be quick and not hurt his parents like that.

The dead. How much they make it hurt. What a proud task for them. They only think about themselves. They own everything. The eternity. And yet they strive to torment us.

He wanted to push those thoughts away. The uneven ground delayed their path to where the men slept. Many went to meet the messenger.

-Sir, why have the men from the sea come?

"I don't know," he said, and made his way looking for the newcomers from the border.

The bodies of the men, still naked and surprised in the middle of the night, moved somewhat twisted by sleep. Murmurs and voices of surprise were raised when he saw his boss appear unexpectedly. Farther to the right, those from the north were washing in jars that others filled with cold water.

"What do you have to report?" he said.

-Sir, we regret the state in which he finds us, but we did not believe it was necessary to disturb his sleep...

Other men interrupted them to stop them from continuing talking, because they had not had time to tell them about the tragedy of his boss.

"Rest," Aristid said. "I'll drink with you." I have also done long walks, and I understand what fatigue is.

He remembered, as he watched them dress and prepare, when he was just another young man among many great men. A young voice that must have forced them to listen to it, despite him being the son of one of the main ones. Now, however, he was the leader, and he felt alone as then, and scared. His second and everyone his age had already arrived when they received the news, but he felt as alone as among a group of children who did not understand his pain.

He looked at the fire, paying attention to the crackling almost louder than the dull voices of the men. He accepted the vessel of wine offered to him and tasted the slightly sweet taste warmed over the flames. But he did not dare to look at the others, because he knew that his own eyes were shining and he did not want them to notice. When everyone was ready, they formed up in front of him.

-With his permission, Sir.

-Talk.

-Five days ago the ships arrived at the north coast. Big ships like we've never seen before. They landed far from the shore, but the men who came down from them quickly built docks. They brought logs and even broke their boats to build them. Afterwards hundreds of men came down with their

women, and when we were ready to come and inform him, they were bringing down horses, so many that we couldn't count them.

-Weapons?

-Yes sir. Spears, bows and arrows. And many instruments and artifacts that we don't know about.

-What are they like, how do they dress?

-Their clothes are very beautiful despite looking dirty. They wear skins of beautiful bears and well-cared for goats. But they look sick, I think weak from hunger. We watch them from our shelters in the rocks, and we hear their voices. They speak a strange language, but some, who seemed to be the leaders, used words in our language.

Aristid consulted with his assistants, while the others waited.

"Did they look hostile?" asked one of his men.

-I couldn't say, Sir. But they demonstrated their intention to settle here for a long time.

"And they won't settle for the beach!" another shouted. "We must prepare to fight!"

"Wait," said Aristid. "We must know if they are our enemies or those of the faithful." They can make the fight easier for us if we fight against them.

-But what will we gain if they beat them, if we can't beat the new ones?

Aristid looked at the speaker, but one of the newcomers said:

-Gentlemen, if there wereseen their forces... They are superior in weapons, of that I have no doubt.

"How many men can travel on those ships?" Aristide asked.

-Maybe three hundred each, if we don't count the women, children and animals.

-But more can come.

-It's true.

Aristid decided to oppose the idea of fighting blindly.

-In any case, the faithful are many more. We have counted almost two thousand men, who we know we will not be able to defeat alone. I insist on seeing the new ones. We will leave on an expedition to the coast in two days.

But the newcomer asked to speak again.

-They could surprise us sooner, Lord.

-We are in mourning, my father has died. There will be no fighting while the funerals last.

The other stood still, not knowing how to excuse himself. Someone approached him to whisper in his ear about Aristid's son. Then he could no longer say a word in front of his boss, who was looking at him harshly and then turning to return to his store. The warriors, silent and crestfallen, prepared to rest the remainder of that night.

On this stone bridge, on this last day of your funeral, I deliver you, father, to the region of the dead. The sun decays like an ember that is extinguished without anyone feeding it with new wood, not even with a breath to fan the flames for a while longer. The shadow of the rocks crushes you. I put my hands on it, and it's heavy and hard and cold.

On both sides, there are the warriors, watching you, watching my actions. My hands, in case they shake. But they don't observe my eyes. The leather mask covers me, what the old women gave me so I wouldn't see the face of death. They say that when you touch the dead, a part of that area gets into the blood of the living, and sows discord, conflict, and despair. We see the limit without limit, the border that we must cross without weapons. I'm not wearing gloves. My hands will defend themselves. And it is my father whom I cover with the fabrics that will accompany him forever.

I lift the leather blanket. His face is free. They hand me the ancient, chalice-shaped vessel with oils, whose lid someone has lost a long time ago. The smell is sweet, so much so that sometimes it transforms into an unbearable, almost sour aroma. But it must be the perfume of the dead that dances in the air. That is why we have left it here for three days, so that the essence, the perfumed soul, can detach itself from the body and warn the beings in the air that it is ready to say goodbye to us definitively. Even from the aroma, because that also fades away. And then there is nothing left but nothing.

I pour the oils on your face, which is shining. The sunset lights fall with thick drops on your forehead and cheeks. Eyelids closed. Thin lips. The almost stony beard. Your beard has grown these days, father. For what reason, I wonder. I look at the feet, still free of the shroud. Your nails have grown too. If we could, my men and I, kiss your beard and your nails, to extract from them the secret that makes them live in the midst of death. A secret according to the mind of the Gods. What if the Gods die too? If you could trim the nails of all the dead and build the hull of an immense ship, would you sail towards life or death? From one place to another, continuously and without end?

Your face loses beauty, it seems to flatten as if seen underwater. Then I cover you completely with the blanket, and wrap your body with ribbons like a bundle. I put oil again, this time as a thread of thick essence on the fabric. I return the pot, they give me a bag with dry leaves. I take handfuls and break them up to spread them over the oil. The evening breeze fails to remove them.

Then I scrape one stone over another, until the sparks fly, still weak, like children who have not yet been born. But the torch is finally lit, and raising it as high as I can, I look at my men.

They will do the same with me, I tell them. But they don't need to promise it out loud. The torch falls on the bundle. The fire breaks out, as if you had been waiting for it, father, as if you had been waiting for it since you were born.

In the morning, Aristid and thirty other men set out for the northern coast. Some of those who had come from there went with them. No one could convince him to stay in the town. He was the boss, they had told him, the only one capable of organizing them. If they were to mortally wound him, perhaps everything done until then would be lost in the void of the past.

-My father fought so that the rebellion could stand on its own.

-But, Sir, all the older people have died of hunger in the last winter of the war, and of the young people, you are the only one we respect.

Aristid, who was looking at his son, who was still delirious, while they spoke to him, had rejected those arguments with a gesture of boredom. He moved his hands as if he were pushing away from his face ainsect, and did not look at the others again. They left the tent and prepared to leave.

They were traveling for three days. The weather grew warmer as they left the mountains, and the rocks gave way to low bushes on sand-dotted land. They saw the wide plateau interrupted by hills, and on the horizon a great brilliant reflection that undulated and seemed to be suspended from the sky.

"The sea!" one of his men shouted.

Aristid walked with his head down and thoughtful, then he looked up and placed a hand on his forehead. The golden glow of the sun made his eyelids furrow. He still saw nothing but low rocks at the end of that entire expanse.

-Behind the hills, Lord...-another indicated.-We have taken this path to surround the valley of the faithful. Behind the rocks are the intruders. Their guards are posted on the slopes.

-Send two men to explore. We have to be sure that they are not waiting for us.

Two warriors separated from the rest and disappeared in the blinding reflection of the sun. The others decided to rest and recover. The heat had overwhelmed them since they had left, and their water supplies had been exhausted as if they had spent much more time on the journey.

"We are in the midst of enemies," he said, looking north.

Those who heard him nodded without answering. Everyone knew how to look only in that direction, their eyes eager to see, among the bushes and the clear sky, among the sparkling rays of the sun on the dry grass, a movement. Even the futile summer breeze moving a branch could not be left aside.

The wait lasted half a day. Only when the sun was setting did the envoys return at a slow pace, relying on their spears to advance. Some came forward to receive them with water, and picked up the sweat-soaked clothes that the others took off. Aristid approached them and asked for information.

-Deserted road, Lord. There are only guards in the northwest area of the valley. Beyond, the rocks are free to observe. But no more than ten men should go.

Aristid told them to rest, and chose nine.

"Sleep," he told everyone that night. "Rest your eyes to look tomorrow with attentive alacrity." If they knew how to see the soul in the body of men... The battle depends on this. We will choose enemies, and that is not an everyday privilege.

They left before dawn. Aristid was at the head of a compact column, the men's gazes vigilant, their gazes and weapons ready. They did not intend to demonstrate their limited power: that the enemy would doubt, that they would see them defenseless, and they would then bring out their hidden thorns and stings.

The hills rose like green humps, with low bushes and few crooked trees. Ancient rocks that seemed to have been there before the sea. The grass disappeared and in its place grew plants with long, thin leaves. Tufts of bushes flowering between mounds of sand and rock. A soft breeze brought the smell of lassitude from the hills. The path continued to be marked by footprints that many other men had dug perhaps hundreds of winters before. Generations that had disappeared like sand carried by the wind and the sea.

-They didn't tell me that this area was inhabited.

-We don't really know, Sir. They are very old brands. Touch the footprints on this rock, they are from more than a hundred winters ago, perhaps.-Then the man looked towards the distant path that led to the hills, between steep walls.-The plants have grown recently, they invaded the free spaces between the stone. . The land seems to have recovered after a long time. None of our people have been here in at least fifty winters.

The rest of the way was surrounded by walls the height of several men, too much. The roots of the plants that grew high up and protruded from the walls served to support them. The mid-afternoon light illuminated the upper half, but the rest remained in cold shadow. They kept looking up, waiting for an ambush. By mid-afternoon they were still climbing, but finally they found their way out. The stone walls were suddenly interrupted, and at the top of the hill they had reached, the highest of all, they sat on the ground of sandstone and stones. They looked north, and saw the sea. None of them had seen it before, and what they once imagined was different from what they saw. They stayed still, protecting themselves from the sun with their hands on their foreheads and wetting their heads with the water they brought in reserve. Some remained standing, speechless.

-For the gods!

-But where does it end? I can't see it.

-There, on the horizon the waters fall into the void. That's what they told me.

"Listen," he told them.

A sound of waters falling on themselves, smoothly. Then, a dull stridency began the continuous breaking of the waves that hit the rocks and died on the beach, leaving corpses of foam on the sand. Like the limit between both worlds. Advancement and retreat of borders.

Like in war.

"Listen," she insisted.

But while some closed their eyelids, drowsy from the sun, he opened his eyes wider, searching for the origin of a sound different from the one he had heard until then.

And he saw the seamen come to the beach at the foot of the cliff. A formation with spears and shields behind a leader dressed in white fur and a cap that barely hid a mane of red hair. They seemed to be exploring, searching around the beach and making comments to each other, pointing out places, perhaps the entrances to the caves under the cliffs.

Aristid signaled to his people to back off, but it was this movement that gave them away. The seamen raised their heads and ran to the base of the cliff and climbed a ladder carved into the rocks. He knew he was trapped,

the path back was too narrow to escape in time. He ordered the spears and daggers to be prepared, but the newcomers appeared one after another, and their number became twice theirs, and then three times more. They walked in a threatening position, shield in one hand and spear in the other. On their backs they carried bows and arrows, and from their waists hung a whip and a jagged stone ball.

When they were surrounded and trapped against the stone walls, the leader appeared among the others. When he finished climbing, he looked for who could be the leader of those men, and his eyes fell directly on Aristid. He was a young man, even younger than him. Maybe that's why he wasn't afraid or ashamed. Being defeated by a greater number of men did not disgrace him, but it did disgrace him if his enemy was an old man hidden behind the strength of his men. Now that he saw him up close, his features suggested vague memories, as if he had ever seen him before. He had no sign of threat on his face.

-Who are you? -The stranger asked him in a foreign language, which he nevertheless managed to understand.

Aristid did not respond. He felt like the leader of a pack about to die. Animals to whom hunters deigned to say a word before killing them.

"We are going to die fighting," he said.

"I'm not asking you that, but your name." The stranger's language was full of foreign accents, but he spoke without difficulty.

-Is my name going to save our lives?

-Maybe…

Then Aristid sighed as the image of his son came to mind.

He looks like a child, I think I've seen him before.

-I am Aristide, from the lineage of artisans. I am the leader of the rebels.

He saw the other smile at him and signal to his men to put down their weapons, while he said:

-I have heard about you, and I was hoping to find you.

-But how does he speak our language?

-Because I was born here, in the lands of Droinne. I know every tributary, arm and bend of this river. I was very little when I left, but those memories are not lost, they grow when you have nothing else to think about.

Aristid watched him in amazement. Sweat ran down his face and he wiped it with the backs of his hands. He gave orders to his men to rest. The

two leaders sat next to each other on the edge of the cliff, while the others shared the water while still looking at each other with distrust.

-My name is Sigur, grandson of Zor.

Aristid smiled. Hearing that name gave him as much relief as the cool breeze coming from the sea. But then he remembered Zaid, and the fear returned.

-If they come to your brother's aid, this is not the way to treat us. Talking to us and giving us drink before annihilating us is not worthy.

-You insist on saying that I will kill them.

-Because you are the brother of our enemy.

-You're wrong. I have been told that Zaid is the chief of the village, so he has recovered what he belonged to our grandparents' grandparents. What the people of the West took from them, until they almost made us disappear. Give me time, and I'll tell you the whole story later.

-I don't understand. Your brother is a tyrant, and you don't know it. What we hated about Reynod has been overcome by Zaid's blindness, his cruel obstinacy in leaving everyone homeless more than this valley in which the dead lake grows. He does not bury the corpses, and makes men hunt for themselves on moonless nights, because they are hungry.

Sigur looked confused.

-It's my blood, and I must talk to him before doing anything else.

-You will not do it. You won't even recognize it.

And an expression of anger appeared on Sigur's face.

-It's true, but I don't know you either and yet I have decided not to kill you.

During the afternoon they shared the fishing and planned the actions for the following days. ace. Aristid would return with his people waiting for Sigur and his father, who would go to the valley to talk to Zaid, and needed him to accompany them to make peace. But for Aristid there was no possible peace, he only saw an opportunity to reach the valley without being attacked. His people would mix with the newcomers, and if the faithful attacked them, they would have no choice but to fight alongside the rebels. He would not trust the seamen, even if their leaders were born in Droinne.

If he only managed to infiltrate his men between the shields of the newcomers, he would make the fatal disease progress on tyranny. Worm men like warrior worms that ate away Zaid's power from within. No, he wouldn't be fooled. The bond of blood was always stronger than ideals, if

Sigur was truly sincere. As soon as he saw his brother, he would succumb. The older brother, who he can never completely defeat.

The next morning, a cold wind woke them up when it was already dawn. The sea had risen and was high, and the waves reached very close to where they were lying. They stretched and warmed themselves in the sun, waiting for the sand to warm, slowly. Many got into the water and shared the morning, and that trust between both groups was strange. He and Sigur had managed to appear confident about each other to others, and it was enough to make the warriors feel almost like children whose parents were engaging in a friendly, delayed but safe and calm conversation.

Looking at the sea, he thought, waiting for everyone to get ready, fill their saddlebags, clean their spears of the sand that had covered them during the night. His own dagger, despite having only been a day, seemed covered in small stains. So rudimentary compared to the metals of the newcomers, that he was embarrassed to clean it while they watched. That's why he refused to do it before leaving the beach, also an inaccessible border that trapped them between the rocks and the sea.

Sigur glanced up at him from time to time from the circle in which his men had formed to eat. Others did training maneuvers on the beach, or simply ran. But he heard behind, on the cliff, a voice calling him, and everyone turned. Aristid put his hands on his forehead to cast a shadow and see him better. He was not the same messenger, surely the other had already died.

They didn't give him time to get down. Sigur's men caught him, while Aristid ran towards them.

-He is a messenger! -He shouted.

They immediately released him and took him with the others. The young man was thin and short, and he trembled next to those strong warriors. His long hair was wet, stuck to his face with sweat. When he was in front of his boss, he looked at him silently.

"What happened?" Aristid asked.

But the messenger did not respond, looking suspiciously at those he did not know.

-Speak, we are among allies.

-Sir...the child died last night.

Aristid remained still, expressionless. A cold peace under the summer sun. Eyes closed, hair riding with the wind on his forehead, head slightly tilted. One side of the face illuminated, the other in shadow. He opened his

eyelids a little. A bright eye, hidden by a lock of dark hair. The other blinded by the shadow. As if he were looking not at what was before him, sand and rocks and men that meant nothing to the eye of the present. The eye fixed on the immediate memory, suspended from the sky so blue, so luminously splendid, that it was as if the child were looking at it from the sun. To him, his father, confused among so many men on that beach.

He turned towards the sea. The others made way for him, and only his people accompanied him, without touching him, only with their eyes on the sand, or on the strangers, again distrustful. When someone died, when a child died, someone had to be to blame.

Aristid grabbed the dagger. The others approached, but retreated when he refused. They decided to leave him alone. Then, as the waves lapped at his feet, sinking a little into the wet sand, crestfallen and without crying, he began to clean his weapon.

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He lamented the evil that affected his legs. He would never again be the same man who had set sail from the Northern Village. Like a punishment. An evil that would take away the time he had left to live. His past filled with a never-satisfied need to see changes around him. A different world like the sea was from the land. A concern that his swollen and darkened legs would not allow her to see.

On the horse, his legs became numb and the pain of the sores became more tolerable. The same ones that he had seen in the animals during the trip.

"Who hurt him?" He had asked the first tNuity caused him a sad smile.

A latent punishment in the bodies of the animals, even before they had arrived in those lands, perhaps even before they left, even before he burned down the town. The epidemic had spread throughout the ship. Fifty horses had died before anything could be done. In the mornings and every afternoon, the bodies that festered under the sun on the deck, where they had been taken to protect them from the humidity, were thrown into the water with nauseating vapors that decomposed and infected the men. Then these too began to die. And all this in the middle of nowhere. Of the sea that stretched enormously, without giving them any signs of moving forward. Only the sun was their guide, but the sun exacerbated the sores, and they had to remain below deck, smearing ointments on each other with cries of pain.

Later, when the same plague had affected two other ships, the mortality finally decreased. From one ship to another signals were given to remain isolated. He did not even allow food to be taken to the infected ships, and the sick were resigned, knowing that what was left in the warehouses had been in contact with the horses, with their feces white as milk, with skin covered with red ulcers in deep beds. of malodorous suppuration. Men would become the same, soft masses reddened by the sun, and souls that paled in the empty reflection of the sea.

There were many dying people on deck, releasing feces that scattered on the wood, while their faces were wrinkled as if they were being lacerated. Shortly afterward they remained motionless. Then Tol lifted them up. They were light, like an old man without muscles, like Zor when he died. Without the weight of the soul. Just flesh falling apart from the sun. And he would throw them overboard. But his hands had touched the man's feces, just as he had touched the first sore on the sick horse.

Tol looked at his fingers, remembering the outlines of the sores, the circles they formed, and his memory was filled with the soft stench of the feces that he had not been able to completely clean. Even though he had so much water around him, that the world was only and nothing more than water, nothing would cleanse what had already been done.

The stain, the mark, the seed.

On the horse, now looking at his legs, he consoled himself with the idea that at least Sigur had been saved. He had seen him take command, respected by everyone with the same veneration that he had deserved until then. But the look of the men who rode around his son had something different. The feeling that they obeyed him even though the young man barely murmured his order, as if even his simplest wishes were a command shouted out loud.

The sway carried his head from one side to the other of the horizon of his eyes. This was the first morning of the trip to the valley. The rocks on the coast gave rise to aridity, where the sun fell fully on the dry remains of the grass. Only the thorny bushes grew, upright and prickly. But further away, a dark green spot, sunken between mountains and hills, awaited them. He had heard a lot about the valley and the lake, but no matter how much he believed Cesius's word, he would never be convinced that his son Zaid was a tyrant. The news that he had recovered the town taken from Zor pleased him with the almost certainty that they would no longer need to fight. And this comfort relieved the heaviness of his legs, and he realized where it came from: his tired head, his exhausted eyes, his body like a splintered log softened by humidity. His mind, in agreement with his body, took solace in the suspension of battle.

But if that's not the case, if despite everything we must fight...

Sigur was there to do it.

Travel, plan so much. So much accumulated desire, turned into legs that dissolve in the wind. I was, at least, the boat that carried his son over the sea.

However, he tried again and again to rebel against such ideas.

Fight father against son, brother against brother? We will never get to that.

Why, if he had fathered both, one would be such an honorable man of command, and the other someone full of evil, as they said. Not even circumstances would change the goodness of his children.

A long time ago I thought of them as strange men. Alienated from me by the facts of the world. Men simply. Neither good nor bad. But evil or goodness bring us closer, move spirits, awaken abandoned beliefs. A man can be ignored, but not a man who acts. And therein lies the horror: in the choice of act that leads another man, his father, perhaps, to love him or hate him.

The caravan advanced with them ahead. Sigur, guarded by fifteen men on each side. Behind him, three guards followed Cesius, who rode on his red tarpan, thoughtful and silent. LuEgo was him, almost lying on the animal's back, to keep his legs raised. He glanced back. A sea of heads swayed, advancing on their horses, and further away, the caravan expanding like a field of men, were those who were walking with bows, arrows and shields on their backs, similar to hundreds of beetles in search of shelter. Three hundred men accompanied them, the rest had stayed on the beach waiting to be called.

At the end of the second day, as twilight appeared between the trees of the highest mountain in the west, they saw a mass of men moving towards them from the lower part of the slope. The orange sun was facing them, and Tol stood up on his horse.

"It's them!" one of his men shouted.

Sigur drew a large welcoming circle with his arms. Then he rode toward his father, while the sound of the hooves of a dozen tarpans drifted that way.

-Aristid and his people! You will recognize him, he is very similar to his father -he told Tol.

Tol barely remembered them, but he didn't say anything. The caravan stopped, and the groups further away followed a short distance and also stopped. That was the hottest summer in a long time. He wiped his forehead with the backs of his hands.

"We are used to the northern climate," he said.

"It's true," Sigur agreed. "How are your legs?"

They didn't look at each other. They had their eyes fixed on the movements of the rebels.

-They don't hurt me. When it's cooler, I'll start training them again. I could have died...

Sigur looked at him this time, because his father had put a hand on his arm.

-You saved me…

But Sigur, hiding his eyes behind the long hair that fell over his forehead, red and dirty under the evening sun, answered him nothing. Tol had a feeling that everything was going to repeat itself. That children became parents to their parents. Just as he had helped Zor with the sorceress's preparation, Sigur had saved his life with that bitter-tasting mixture that he prepared during the trip. He had told his son not to change ships. Seeing him on the raft, approaching the infected ship where he was, he had shouted to him:

-Don't come close or I'll kill you.

Sigur did not obey him.

-I'd rather kill you than see you die like me.

But his son continued moving forward, alone in the middle of a cloudy afternoon, surrounded only by water and clouds. The splashing of the bodies in the sea could be heard from afar, while the raft made its way through the corpses towards his father's ship. His arms punished the oars until he finally arrived, hitting the hull and holding on to the wood by a lasso that Sigur threw hard toward the deck. He then stood up on the raft.

-Do not go up! What are you coming to tell me?

-Hand me another rope, father! I'll tie the pot up for you! You must drink from it in small sips, and you will be cured.

And while Sigur tied the container, closed with a leather cover, Tol believed he was listening to himself a long time ago. But he, unlike Zor, would not drink in desperation.

He unwrapped the pot. A black feather, which had been wrapped in the sheath, fell from his hands. It had to be that bird Sigur had the day they met. He smelled the preparation, without knowing how to define it. Then he drank it in slow, short sips, feeling the bitter taste of the northern birds. His meat mixed with spices. He poured the contents into his mouth until not a single drop remained, and threw the vessel into the sea. Then, looking

around him, like someone hiding a treasure without wanting anyone to see it, he kept the pen between his clothes and his chest.

That and the liquid, or perhaps the same need not to die before seeing his goal achieved, made him recover. Maybe all this together, but Sigur's mixture had the privilege of carrying with it a repeated memory. Images that told him about the final rapprochement between father and son, the moment in which one of them would enter death.

But now that he was saved, he watched Sigur move with the warm breath of his acrid breath. His son hardly smiled anymore. He spoke to him calmly, without anger or recrimination, but with a dark, impenetrable sadness that covered his forehead, full of thoughts. He spoke, but Sigur's eyes went towards the mountains that surrounded the valley. Thinking of his brother, perhaps. The same uncertainty that he suffered. But it was something else, too. With her hands gripping the tarpan's mane, and her legs squeezing the flanks of the herb-foraging animal, his son seemed to know more than his father.

-What do you think? -He asked her.

The column of men descended like a viper among the bushes on the slope.

-Nothing, father.

-Doubts about your brother.

Sigur looked at him sadly.

-That's the problem, father. I have no doubts, and I would like to have them.

-Then you think he has betrayed us.

-There will be betrayalIt was to know that we would come. He acted according to his previous wishes, whatever they were.

-There must be a reason, and perhaps we will see that everything Cesius said is deception.

-Father, Aristid told me the same thing. And he remembers that they both come from enemy families, even though Cesius has abandoned his.

A tingling of sounds came crawling through the earth, and up the horses' legs. The footsteps of the rebels moved like ants in a caravan that crawled between the trees and spread out towards the plain where they waited. The voices were also heard with shouts of command. Tol heard them, feeling that those who came there were strangers. His people, the men who had always defended his father, seemed alien to his own life. The distance of time and customs was so great that even his goal, he had become an

isolated thing, like a wall that protected him and had to be dragged with too much effort. An obsession that fed itself, spinning without ever getting tired of the repetition of it.

The rebels arrived at night. The torches illuminated the column, which was no longer a column, but a group of men who arrived in groups, exhausted even before starting any battle. They appeared in groups of twenty or thirty men, sometimes only a few, with no one to present them to the leaders. They isolated themselves in a dark sector of the camp, around small campfires, to rest, with their eyes always down and on their weapons or on the flames. But a larger group came forward to receive him, their heads illuminated by the play of the torches in their dark hair.

Tol leaned on his son's left shoulder. He felt healthy, rested and eager to appear strong in front of others. From the circle of torches in which the men were lost, between shadows melting one into another, one emerged protected by two others. Tol didn't see their faces, only silhouettes leaning against the artificial sun that night. The flames reminded him, fleetingly, of the Northern Village. The figures advanced towards them, and the one in the middle knelt.

He felt someone take his hand and kiss it. The beard sent a shiver down his forearm. It was short and sharp, and the breath had the aroma of ferments. Instead, the shadow was more gentle and ethereal.

"Sir..." said the voice, hoarse and young, with slow tones.

Then Sigur snatched a torch from the hands of one of his guards and illuminated Aristid's face. His eyes shone as he looked up. He was still on his knees, with Tol's hand in his.

-Sir, it is an honor for us.

"Stand up," Tol asked him, without recognizing him. He looked for familiar features in Aristid's face, the features of his father. The other stood up.

-I remember, Lord, when he came with his son to my father's hut.

"It's not possible," he hurried to answer. "Sigur never went hunting with me, he was very little when..."

-His other son of his, Lord...

Tol felt sad and hurt. There was resentment in the other's voice.

-Is your hatred so much that it hurts me like this?

-Maybe I do not know. But remember Zor. Think about hate, and you will be right. Pains are not forgotten, neither is rejection, and hatred easily arises from them.

"That's not what we agreed on," Sigur interrupted.

-I have not agreed to anything. We are allies by necessity. Look behind. There are hundreds of men waiting for orders to die, for at least one valid reason. Without doubts or regrets that weaken the strength of the reason that brought them here. I will not yield my men to the shadow of

the doubt. You and us. Not mixed. If it weren't his eldest son who separates us...

Tol nodded, silently. There was some melancholy on Aristid's face.

"Where is the respect you owe my father?" said Sigur.

-Respect ended with the death of my son. I only owe respect to myself and mine. - He approached Tol, and he made a quick gesture of defense.

"Don't be afraid of me," he told her, and gave her a kiss on the cheeks. "For the past," he murmured later. He turned and was lost in the clearing of torchlight.

The journey continued for three days. The group of men and weapons moved slowly through the steep areas, the paths and groves covered with stones towards the Lost Mountains. Narrow paths that no more than ten men entered at a time. Aristid's people had been mixing among Tol's men. His calm and friendly attitude contrasted with the severity of his boss. It seemed like a strategy, and Tol didn't fail to notice it. But an ally was a friend, he told himself, and Aristid, as an enemy, could be unpredictable. So he observed, from his mount, the stains on the rebels' dark clothes, blending like circles of blood between the light clothes and the white skins of his own men.

A storm was approaching from the southr. Deformed and black clouds revealed isolated lightning bolts, which caused chills in the horses.

"It will rain," he said, to break the silence in which they had been riding for a while.

Cesius was at his side. The red tarpan looked nervous, shaking his head, as if he wanted to get rid of the reins.

-Do you say it because of the clouds in the valley? They have always been there, ever since the flood lake formed a few winters ago. I've already told him about this, but he didn't expect you to understand until you saw it for yourself.

Up ahead, the people Sigur led had stopped at the edge of the valley, the closest place they could get to without entering the town. They could be seen as a gray spot in the fog, which despite it being noon, remained like a

continuous twilight. But Tol's thoughts were interrupted when he saw an arrow on his horse's neck. The animal reared for a moment and then collapsed, while many more fell around. He thought about his legs, and jumped before the horse crushed him, but his spear broke and the creaking of the wood resonated loudly, as if it were the only sound in the world at that moment. However, there were shouts of disarray, command orders, gallops and the whirring of endless arrows. His men fell. Many were fleeing, but he saw that some formed a shelter with their shields, but the arrows continued to increase in intensity.

Cesius wanted to help him, Tol had already gotten up. His legs obeyed him. Then he helped him onto the red horse, and they galloped to the circle where his people were. A mouth opened in the center, black and warm, full of the heat and sweat of men. Invaded by moans and tremors that pride would not let show for a long time. The gray light filtered through the slots between the shields, on which the arrows continued to clatter with the same exact sound as torrential rain. They received them among the beams of light where the dust was spinning.

"They attacked us from the rear!" someone lamented.

"We already know that," said Cesius. "I was sure that Zaid wasn't going to even give us time to talk." He doesn't take risks.

"But he doesn't know that it is his family that he attacks," said Tol.

Cesius did not insist.

-We will wait for the arrows to stop. Then we will send two messengers to Sigur. One will have to be a decoy. But if they fail, there will be no opportunity for a third.

A nearby dark forest separated them from Sigur and his men. The horses had refused to approach that night, because the wolves had howled, and only agreed to continue when the sun illuminated the path. They had to get out of the trap before the next night.

A while later the arrows diminished in strength.

"Now is the time," said Tol.

A messenger rode out. They watched him disappear from sight while the arrows followed him like flocks of small, long birds. The second messenger set out only then, taking a path sunken into the high gravel. Not even the dust rose in his wake. Two shields protected him, resting on the horse's flanks. The clouds were growing. Lightning flashed between the arrows and illuminated the messenger as he disappeared behind the trees on the western slope.

-Let's keep going!

The shield shell moved towards the south. When they reached the forests, the dull reflection of the sun on the leather illuminated the ground a little more, and the arrows were lost among the mass of the trees.

-They will catch us here, Lord!

-That's why we have to move forward. Look at these old trees. They are easy prey for fire.

Throughout the afternoon, they fled towards the exit that ended in the plain where Sigur must be. Nothing was heard except the galloping and frightened neighing of the tarpans. The sun appeared from time to time between the clouds that the wind tried to blow away. The horses began to get excited, stopping and stamping their feet on the ground. They turned and saw what they feared: the fire that some lit arrow had started in an old log. They were fast, faster than fire, but the forest was also enormous food for a bonfire.

The red horse continued riding tirelessly, carrying Cesius and Tol, but despite his strength, he began to relegate ground to others, getting lost in the group of men and animals.

"Keep going, don't stop!" some shouted to encourage their companions.

-What a disaster, Lord!

-He has surprised us dishonorably!

"Don't be discouraged!" He said, panting, already forgetting about his illness, believing himself to be young again. His gray hair swayed docilely in the cold wind among the hundreds of trees they still had to cross.

The forest fire. He dreamed of it from a long time ago. He was now the old man and not the young man.

The trees are always the same. Fire burns the same way. Themen die as always. The body has no secrets for that. Death illuminates the spaces between the bones, and there are no longer secrets, mystery or doubts.

The messengers should have arrived, but it was useless. They were not persecuted by men, but by the fire that no one could fight, they just had to let it grow until their food ran out. Tol held on tightly to Cesius's back, for he felt the trees swaying above his head and he feared he would fall from his horse.

But soon they found themselves in open ground, with bright green grass. A wide meadow with a gentle curve leading west. The afternoon was ending, and it seemed to shine on the grass, which absorbed the light to reflect it again in greenish and ocher tones. There began the valley, where the hill descended in a long slope. And in contrast to the almost ethereal luminosity, as if it remained suspended from the clouds, the dark matter of

the lake resembled an abyss whose bottom could not be fully seen. The clouds continued to spiral, speckled with light and orange spots.

They saw men peering out from the horizontal curve of the hill. First the heads, then the bodies, finally the horses. Sigur's people were riding quickly towards them. Tol felt relief. They were no longer alone. But the fire grew behind, taking over the last trees. The immense smoke rose to the sky, covering in gray the few parts through which the sun still penetrated.

"Father!" Sigur could be heard shouting in the distance, among the trotting of the tarpans.

Tol told Cesius to go to the hill, and motioned for his men to follow. He could no longer specify how many men he had left.

"Father!" Sigur shouted once more.

His son's horse came up beside him, and Sigur's arms grabbed him by the waist and led him to his own tarpan. Tol felt his strength return. On his chest she felt the tickle of the feather, and she let Sigur take control of him.

"Let's go to the valley!" He heard him order, with his left arm raised.

Everyone looked back once more at the fire that could no longer advance over the fresh grass and young grasses.

Cesius, Tol and Sigur went ahead, and soon reached the west end of the hill. The hillside had a slope, like a river bank or a beach. But the horses began to rear again.

-The fire!

"It is no longer fire they fear, and it is not behind but ahead," said Sigur. "They tremble differently."

It was true, it was a different tremor, the desperation could almost be palpable. The tarpans would calm down at times, and then try to retreat. Despite holding them by the mane and pressing their flanks tightly, the beasts wanted to flee. Behind, the fire continued, still but constant.

"They're going to kill us!" said Tol. "They want to take us back to the flames!"

-No, father. They are fleeing from the valley, don't you see? -And he looked towards the lake.

The sky seemed to fall with its heavy purple color over the entire region, even beyond the mountains.

"By all the gods," Sigur murmured.

-Do you see?

"Look!" he shouted, rising on his saddle over the restless horse.

The others came closer to see. The slope was a dark path without contrasts. Only the lightning continued with its intermittent light. Some glitter had formed on the surface of the lake. A cold, stormy air passed through the area, and the clouds rotated faster, changing the hues of the sky from almost night to a state of rainy twilight. Something had grown in the air. Something that had made the beasts' fur stand on end. Even the men felt a chill down their spine and a tingling sensation in their arms.

-What is this? -Asked Tol, who felt that the blood was circulating more quickly in his legs again.

"It's life, that's what life smells like," said Cesius.

The lumps on the surface of the lake were moving like thick waves that did not break on any beach. They rose and seemed to rise towards the sky only to fall again in countless empty drops.

-I saw the waters rise to the sky, but this time they are being born.

-Who is it?

Tol was exasperated by the way Cesius told things, as if he always spoke to himself and not to others.

-They take the lives of the beings around them. They feed. The dead want to live again. They no longer want to be just shadows that some men sometimes see.

The horses became uncontrollable and began to run towards the forest. Only the red tarpan remained a little more composed, and banging his head against those next to him, he seemed to speak to them. Then the three horses stood firm, though trembling, while their owners watched the edges of the lake begin to spread and open like fingers. The lumps had become shapeless things, but they moved forward. dragging waves of mud and mud.

Water masses were changing rapidly. Now they were legs carrying torsos and mixed arms and heads, which soon began to be incorporated into the bodies.

Bodies of warriors.

They were covered in green algae and carried weapons. Spears in the left arm, daggers in the right hand. Heads raised, long black hair. The thick beards. The breasts covered in hair that formed the shape of a spiral, as if the sky had been recorded there.

From all over the shore of the lake, warriors emerged and walked in all directions. Slowly, and without stopping. Just like blind people, but they had eyes. Small dots in the middle of faces hidden by long hair. Black dots like

coals freshly taken from the bottom of a crack, from a well where the water had fed the cultivation of the dead.

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-Women!

Naked Tahia walking towards the water. She alone, and with her eyes closed.

You surrender to them. You've missed them more than you love me.

But Zaid couldn't blame him. Not at that moment when she was sacrificing herself to give him power. The only strength she knew from having touched her with the fingers of her hardened soul, long before, through the unlit entrance to the weapons storage room of the old shack they had shared. Her shroud and her grave. Maybe with those dead eyes, with nothing to do but stare into the darkness, she had watched the guns and the rats. By the time she woke up, her previous doubts or insecure thoughts would have already been covered with dust and acquired the edge that she wounds.

"The intruders of the sea..." she told him two nights ago, lying under the blanket of fog, humid and hot, looking at the sky over the lake. Tahia spoke as if she were translating other voices that came from that place whose elements: water, mud and clouds, seemed to merge into each other, to separate and join again, without ever stopping in their cycle. Spiraling, twinkling at times. A dense, bottomless darkness was closing in on the center, where nothing could be clearly distinguished, not even a wave or reflection. The sand on the beach was no longer sand, but clods hard as stone.

"The intruders of the sea," she repeated, "will come, and they are strong, they can defeat you."

-They will not.

-Believe me if I say it.

-I don't doubt your word. But this time you're wrong. I found the weapons of the rebel leader, which Reynod had hidden.

-But there is a lot of time left for them to be ready. You said it yourself days ago and postponed the attack.

Tahia's gaze remained fixed on the clouds that were moving heavily, as if the sky had decided to change her home without fully deciding yet.

Vertigo startled Zaid, and she felt that it was he who was moving or the earth that was rising.

"They're waiting for me," she said. "For so long…I promised to come back." I told them that I would return to life for a time to prepare the necessary events for his return. The return of those who never die. What can be bigger than them. You mortals are nothing. Clods that fall apart when you close your fist.

Zaid looked at her, saddened. Something was squeezing his chest and squeezing his throat. His eyes watered and he laid down on Tahia's body.

-I'm afraid of being alone. I will be able to do nothing in your absence.

She laughed.

-Don't you remember when you carried me from our home to the mountains? You have survived without my help for a long time, but you can't do this alone. It's not even your task, but mine. "They," she said, pointing to the lake, "are mine."

Carter of the dead.

He didn't remember who had given him that name. Beast and cart at the same time. That was him. Instrument of others.

Matrix…matrix.

The voices mixed in his memory.

Pleasure giver.

Instrument. And then nothing. Matter for waste and time. And then nothing. Not even the soul. He had been born without a soul. With that idea that illuminated her mind as if she were still new after so many winters, she once again felt that old childhood pain. Her skin burned, and she began to take off her clothes. Tahia looked at him, without fear. With his legs spread, his knees resting next to his wife's hips, Zaid scratched his naked body with his nails until he hurt himself. When he no longer knew how to get rid of that pain, he lay down on Tahia and her lips began to run over her body. Then he started biting her cheeks, her lips, her neck. He continued lower, her breasts, her hips. Zaid's teeth kissed and bit, without looking at her even once, with his eyes closed and his eyebrows furrowed. The marks remained on his skin, small, with a white halo around a red dot.

Then, no longer finding anywhere else to devour with kisses, Zaid penetrated her with more force than usual. She abandoned herself to the arms of the man who paHe had to dance on her body, whose sweat dripped on Tahia and irritated her wounds. Zaid didn't want to leave her. A coming and going through time. One day removed, one winter. That's how he told it, with moans and pain in his face. When he made her final gesture, he pushed

her to the side and remained as she was, face down, eyes open, with her back to Tahia. Her skin was covered in drops that ran down her shoulders. She had her gaze on the lake, lost as if she were actually seeing something else, perhaps a still river.

The next night they slept separately. He didn't dare look into her eyes, but she did watch him.

-Not today, dear. I must prepare for tomorrow. Your body has borne fruit this time, and I have to surrender.

Zaid didn't understand. That's why, on the afternoon of the next day, when she undressed and began to caress her belly, he knew what she had wanted to tell him. He wanted to stop her when Tahia started walking towards the shore of the lake.

-They are waiting for me to wake up. They await the fruit that will give them life back.

Carrier of the dead, drag beast of souls, body born to feed other bodies. Death, resurrection and death. Death, resurrection and death...

The clouds danced over the waters, just as he had danced over Tahia's body, soft as the mud of the lake. The clouds were procreating something in those waters. The empty lives of death.

-Woman! -He shouted as she escaped towards the shore. But when she turned to look at him, he saw white eyes that he had never seen before. A white nothing.

Death is darkness, I'm told. But it's not like that. Death is white. Whiteness of a blind man facing the sun.

Tahia entered the lake. Her feet sank, surrounded by circles of water that no longer seemed so thick. The lonely little figure of her woman under the spiral shadow of the clouds. The dark horizon confusing the water sky and the cloud waters. The woman's helpless silhouette was slowly sinking. But then some beings began to emerge from the surface, and climbed up Tahia's body. They were bigger than simple mud worms. More like dwarfed humans.

He was sure of what he saw, because he remembered it. Small corpses crawled up Tahia's skin and disappeared there. He, who had expelled bodies like that in the mountains, was watching the dead regain a true body.

As she dove up to her neck, two hands emerged from the water. He would never know who they had once belonged to, or why they were such hands and not others. Why not hundreds or just one. The hands pushed Tahia's head under the water, and she didn't come up again.

Zaid was trembling. He looked around, but he saw nothing, as if he were isolated from time in that space of strange colors. Red spots appeared from time to time between the clouds. Yellow dots emerging from the lake.

The noise of bubbles came from there, but he knew that there were no fish in that place. Then he discovered the faces forming with the breeze that moved the waters. The eyes, the mouth, the contours, creating themselves just as a child does when he draws with a branch on the sand. The flat faces faced the sky, and then sloped toward the beach. The entire surface was a continuous blanket of faces, because they had appeared one after another without him having time to see them all. Quickly, two and three at a time in one sector, others much further away. And when all the faces leaned together, the skulls were born like small mountains. Mud lumps. Clay molded by strange hands. The heads rose from the water, and the necks emerged that kept them firm. Wide, bare skin collars. Then the shoulders and arms appeared. Hands with perfect fingers, rigid and fisted, holding the handles of bone daggers and spears covered in seaweed.

And the warriors, because that's what they were, Zaid knew, came with their own weapons to fight for him. They came out of the water forming lines heading towards the beach. They walked in long columns that extended to their origin, in the imprecise center of the lake. But nothing indicated that they would stop being born. Heads, arms and legs continued to appear, and much further back, the bubbling continued to create them.

The warriors advanced towards him. They were already so close that he couldn't help but see the color of her eyes hidden under her hair. The eyes looked like charcoal. Tiny black rocks. The lips were thin as worms. And as he watched those faces approach, the first of them all stopped in front of him. Zaid was not afraid. He felt nothing but a void in which time carried out his implacable command. Time and waiting in the void. That was death.

The warriors knelt. The lip worms separated. The voice of the stench spread in the air.

"Sir," they said. all together, and the clouds above Zaid began to descend and form a cone towards the earth, where the sky seemed to sink. But when the echo of the voices disappeared, the clouds calmed down.

He wouldn't ask them anything. If every time they spoke, the world would make a move to perish, the power he now had was too priceless to waste. It was almost as if he were death. But he wouldn't get his hopes up. He was, solely and as always, an executor.

The warriors have remained still. They can barely see each other in the middle of the night. Only their shoulders and heads stand out, covered in a pale whiteness, like the dust of butterfly wings. It's summer, and insects are flying around. But now they are asleep, perhaps, if they really sleep. His coal

eyes have not closed, however. The weapons are obscured by the shadow of the bodies. I looked at them and they understood me. Today we will rest, I told them later, to think about tomorrow. They all turned their heads at the same time towards the front, and did not move again.

I can't sleep. I close my eyes and open them again. It hurts. I want to look at the warriors. I feel the fear of my men before them. I know no one sleeps tonight. Only the dead do it, and not to rest. They never rest and always sleep.

I would like to close my eyelids, and have sleep invade me as brutally as it did before, accompanied by the spectral beings and their continuous harassment. But today I am a different man, and they are out there, not inside. They are faithful to me and will obey me with a simple curl of my lips.

If when I woke up I was alone. Unleashed from all those dead hands. Just me, isolated, as if dead.

Five of my men come and sit around the fire.

-We are scared, Lord.

-Do not be afraid of those who came out of the lake. I'm going to lead you, you prepare your lines as always.

-It's not just that, Lord. We fear his reaction when he finds out what we have come to tell him. The wounded messengers spoke to us tonight.

-And what did they say?

The men's faces were pale in front of the fire, their lips moving very quietly.

-They have heard the name of Sigur, the name of Tol, and we know...

I look at them carefully. I know they don't lie. Nothing surprises me at this point in my life. But I think I should resist being so gullible.

-They have lied, they are traitors.

-They are dying, my Lord, I don't think they are lying to us.

They wait for my response. Who, however, will answer my questions? The pain springs up again, in the head, like a spokesperson for cries, moans and tears of bones broken by grief. Like drums playing at funerals. “Cursed be he who is born under the sign of nothing,” my mother must have said when she discovered that on the day I was born there was no heaven. My mother in the white robe from the day of my dreamed funeral.

"Was there a woman with them?" I asked.

They shook their heads. Mother, she is no longer here. But the funeral will not stop because of a single absentee. He will continue his journey along the beach, to the bonfire. My father, strong and tall, walks upright in front of the procession. My brother is now a man too. They move forward with their eyes forward. The serious faces, but the shining gaze, escorting the bed in which they carry me. I see my face clearly, and this time I'm not afraid.

Dream life, you use time like clay to turn it into stone!

“They sustain us, they are the land on which we walk.” Grandpa Zor was right. He was talking about me. But my body will survive my death. I will defend myself. The enemies are coming!

The forest fire was a golden line in the dawn on the hill, a wall of smoke rising across the horizon. Ahead, the sea of grass continued in the night shadow. The blanket of fog continued to crush him. And it was that mantle that moved in small eddies: the men of the sea entered that other inclined sea. Sailing on their horses as on boats. Reins like oars. Manes like sails.

I didn't see them yet, but sometimes the glow of a spear sparkled in the dawn. The fog was rising, fast, annoyed and offended by the intruders. They descended on two broad flanks, to the west and north of the hill. Two more groups with men on horseback advanced like waves toward a shore. The size of each column varied from time to time, their contours changed, and perhaps they were just decoys that hid more men behind them. There must have been more than five hundred just in sight, and not even the fire seemed to have scared them.

The sea of grass was so extensive that it would take them a while to get there. They must have known that they had already seen them, but confident in their numbers and in the uncertain fatality of the war, they would not wait for the fire to go out to receive reinforcements.

Zaid thought so, and gave the order to attack. The men advanced towards the hill andn long lines of almost a hundred warriors each. He wouldn't use the lake ones yet, if he could help it. The first two columns began to climb the slope. Each man was not behind the other, but alternated and covering the empty spaces between each row. They had their arrows in their crossbows, ready to shoot, arranged in the position that Zaid had shown them.

-Shoot!

His voice echoed in the voices of the other chiefs, until it reached the warriors, and the arrows flew forming a great arc drawn in the clear morning sky. The arc began to travel the second half of its journey. He had imagined the journey to the top of the hill, and so it was happening. The rain of arrows fell on the northern area. In the west, the enemies had not stopped, but

although they hesitated, they continued to advance, and from there a wave of red-hot arrows burst forth, burning the air and falling on the people of Zaid.

"Keep going!" the leaders said, from group to group, in shouts that were repeated while the arrows continued to emerge from one side and the other.

Zaid came in to fight. The men tried to stop him, but he ran with his spear raised and made his way through the back ranks until he reached the front. He had to jump over the burned corpses and stuck arrows that were still burning. The wounded who saw him pass increased their moans, squeezing a leg, an arm, or the side of the wounded body.

The leaders surrounded him, their faces covered in blood and their arms with open wounds. The corpses had been piled to one side so as not to disturb the progress. They all continued fighting ahead, with axes and daggers against the enemies who had the advantage of numbers and horses, since they could kick and throw spears before they could get close. But the new metal weapons Zaid had found hidden by the old rebels were easier to handle, weapons shaped and polished by fire.

"Kill the beasts!" he shouted, and the animals began to fall with their riders. Then they ripped out the weapons and stuck them on the man again.

Zaid moved further into the front. A tarpan pushed him. He rose up in fury and stabbed him with his spear. The animal staggered and fell on top of the rider. Zaid plunged his dagger into the man. Some came to help him, and continued fighting in the little free space, looking everywhere as they felt the sharpness of the weapons and the blows of the helmets. The corpses made them stumble, the exposed bones breaking when they stepped on them. They rescued the weapons that were still useful, and advanced slowly and man by man, always forward. The men from the west were more numerous, they arrived protected by shields.

-Mass! -He ordered, and the warriors grouped together with their spears raised pointing to the sky.

The rear ranks were disorganized and continued to fight with those arriving from the north. The enemies did not seem to exhaust or diminish their numbers. But Zaid and his men fought with two-handed daggers against everything that was in their path of advance, opening gaps between the enemy ranks. Like a red mass of a volcano, he thought, they must become something as strong and fulminating as lava.

The north side of the hill remained the same, neither front managing to advance much. He ordered his men to go there, and felt the blood drying on his skin. He was soon stained again when his dagger stabbed into another breast, tore out the weapon and again plunged it into the next one that appeared next to him, or behind the one he had killed. One of the leaders of his army was shouting at him, but he could barely see him.

"I'm going ahead of him!" He told him, advancing with spear blows with his right hand, while he used the dagger against those who tried to stop him. He saw him overcome a barrier of ten men with furious shouts and desperate sword blows. The enemies surrounded him, but out of reach of his arms, every time they tried to get closer he threatened them.

Zaid realized that he had opened a path for them, and ordered the others to follow him. The clearing had grown larger when they arrived. The horses retreated and the riders could not control them, as if Zaid and his people were carriers of a plague.

"Form up!" he shouted, and everyone stood in a circle, pointing their spears toward the center and increasing the circle as more arrived. The enemies continued to retreat. But then he saw the balls of thorns tied to their arms with ropes. They flew them in the air several times and began to throw them at them. With a single blow the thick wooden thorns pierced the skulls and the men fell with their heads broken. Sometimes the balls had teeth and would stick to the skull, then they would pull the ropes again and tear them off with pieces of bone and flesh. They cleaned them with their knives and threw them again. rlas. The whistling of all those balls passing through the air at the same time gave the impression of a storm. But the sky, clear and bright, the sun bright at the height of that morning, was as serene as an indifferent witness to the battle.

The balls hit only once and were effective in killing, but they had to get close to use the daggers and axes, and needed more than two or three wounds to finish anyone off. Hand to hand with enemies, almost face and chest against the breath of others. The spears did not give them an advantage either, the balls reached them and they left. Zaid's men began to retreat. The number decreased, and he realized that in a short time they had retreated twice as far as they had advanced that morning. The entire western flank was fleeing back toward the valley.

-Mister! What are we going to do?! -One of his men told him, standing in the mud, with his legs open and tense, his arms hanging, barely holding what was left of the spear. The broken bow hung from his back and the arrows were lost in the mud. His eyes were two dark spots on a face covered in blood and an irrepressible expression of grief rather than fear. It was sadness without consolation, because the fatal weapons had arrived like fists from the gods.

Then Zaid remembered the warriors of the lake, and looking at the sun, he wondered if the dead needed the shade or would still wake up in broad daylight.

-Back!-He shouted, and everyone obeyed and retreated, surrounding his leader and defending the rear as they escaped. Some were dissatisfied, but they did not protest.

"Back off!" He insisted when he saw that they were doing it slowly and with reluctance.

"We are not cowards!" said a voice lost in the tumult, between the hissing of the toothed balls and the clash of the shields.

"Back, back!" he repeated almost desperately, because he could not explain to them at that moment, and he feared that any of them would ruin the plan that had cost him so much time and pain, even without knowing that he had been creating it since that day in the raft, or perhaps much before, on the day of circumcision.

Soon they would reach the beaches, where the corpses of the lake waited still and formed in perfect rows.

Wake up, he said out loud.

But they continued without moving, with their charcoal eyes closed and their seaweed hair blowing in the breeze. Zaid thought that perhaps they were waiting for something more. He chose one of the battle bodies and lifted it onto his back. The dead man's legs dragged in the mud and left grooves. Then he dropped it and pushed it toward the shore. The body sank, but

nothing happened. He looked for another, dragged him by the arms, passing between the rows and fed the waters with the body. The surface moved in concentric circles between the warriors' legs.

Nothing happened either.

-Isn't it enough?! -He shouted very loudly, so that the entire lake could hear him. -If it isn't, there is more here, there will always be more for you. Food will never cease.

His men looked at him sad and disconsolate, and although they were afraid of those waters and the beings that had emerged, each one thought only of his upcoming death.

Zaid went and returned carrying the bodies of those who had been his men, those who had resisted so much, and were now being devoured by the lake.

Death and resurrection.

The dead warriors are the creators of the larvae.

Those who continued to reach the beach fought against the horsemen who pursued them tirelessly. They had lost more weapons in the flight and had only their bodies left to defend themselves. Then they saw that other warriors they did not know had appeared among them. They were not ordinary men, but rather the remains of various united bodies and elements

of water. The men moved away when they smelled the stench of the others. A clearing opened in each of the groups towards which the dead were advancing. And they saw that on the enemy front, the horses began to rear up and throw their riders.

Zaid's thought was one with the events he was contemplating, a bond united him to reality, without interruption. It was not just thought nor only reality. Just absolute presence.

Death and life united.

Dead live.

This was the word of the present, undone and scattered in the mud as an irrefutable present.

She is his own origin and purpose.

The rest: absurd and abomination.

The dead and their strength above the earth.

*

"Defeated!" Sigur lamented, as his father rode beside him, upright despite his fatigue, and looking back at the ghosts of warriors who followed them.

-Just a battle, son.

Sigur had seen him rejuvenate in the middle of the fight. He was the same one he remembered fleeing from the volcano. The slender and tall figure with broad shoulders. Only the graying hair and the freckled skin of old age betrayed the distance between them. reated time. But today, with blood stained on his face and arms, his face sweaty and dirty, and a jagged ball linked to his right hand, he was more than a simple hunter. More so than the young man he had been when he, Sigur, was little. A hunter of men, and the picture of him looked like the childish imagination had sketched him, so many winters before.

His father had never stopped being his father.

They were surrounded by a cavalcade of almost four hundred men fleeing from the valley, pursued by the barely perceptible footsteps of the lake warriors. The pursuers did not threaten them or throw spears. They only followed them like hunters sure that at some point the prey would stop. Neither Sigur nor Tol could blame their people for the fear of those shadows and their appearance, especially that unbearable smell. Some had not been able to open their eyes again after looking at them, and others began to

scream and run, abandoning weapons and horses. But most of them looked towards the forest, and rode towards it. There was nothing but the forest of fallen trunks and others standing giving off white and gray smoke, but many other trees continued to burn in the distance.

Then they entered. Intense heat rose from the ground, although the horses did not rebel: the pursuers were a greater threat to them. The smell of helmets and burning hair when touching the fathoms among the ashes filled the men's throats. They went in silence, more slowly and cautiously. The trunks seemed capable of breaking with a single touch. A hare with scorched fur darted past the tarpans' legs, but the horses did not react.

Tol kept looking back from time to time. The warriors continued to ascend the long slope of the hill.

-Our people should have arrived by now. They must have been killed.

"I don't think so," said Sigur. "Maybe they're still trying to defend themselves and get through the forest." Remember that it has only been burning for a day.

They rode until night came. The ranks of warriors already appeared above the summit. Then, as the moon rose, the shadows of twilight dispersed over the forest. The reddish moon illuminated the smoky contours of the trees from a purple sky. But over the valley, darkness continued.

"Let's rest," said Tol. "They won't dare to enter knowing that we expect reinforcements."

Sigur was hesitant. Most went to bed after feeding their horses, linking the reins to their wrists so they would wake up as soon as the animals moved. Others brushed the beasts' fur as they kept watch. Sigur had forbidden them to light fires. He and his father sat on rocks, listening to the constant snorting of the frightened animals. They were silent for a while, but there was something latent in them that they didn't know how to say.

-Did you see it, father?

Tol looked at his son and lowered his gaze to the ground.

-Yeah. He looks like your grandfather at that age. Thick hair, straight nose...

-He didn't see us, he didn't even look for us.

-Maybe he doesn't know about us.

-Yes, he knows, but he doesn't care.

"I don't believe in that," said Tol, definitively.

Then they fixed their gaze on the blue horizon of the night over the hill. Attentive to every step or rustle on the leaf litter. The monotonous, worn-out voice of each had sounded with irritating tones in the ears of the other.

"I'll get some sleep," said Sigur.

Tol nodded and also lay down where he was, on a bed of straw in a barely dug hole.

Sigur separated from his father and walked between the guards. He had no desire to sleep. He thought about his brother, about the lost battle, and what would happen tomorrow. He looked several times deep into the forest, where pale patches of ash and smoke prevented the arrival of his people. Then he turned to look at the edge of the hill, where the human shadows waited.

Why don't they come for us, why are they late? If they don't need to rest, if the night is their favorable environment, why don't they come to finish us off.

He knew that the dead always acted like this, lurking in hiding, offering futile hopes for the beginning of the day. Death used to come at dawn. It was a custom, just as dreams also came at that time.

Dreams may be from the dead, or their words. That's why we woke up so early, scared. They can't help but touch us, and the skin of the senses reacts and wakes us up. It rescues us for one more day from the abyss.

He was dozing standing there, with his hands behind his back and his legs firm, slightly spread. Swinging as if his mother's arms were still holding him. The night breeze, always smelling of burning, surrounded and enveloped him, rocking him. When he opened his eyes, the light of day was appearing in the east. The sun had not yet risen, but the sky looked clearer and the stars were fainter. Then he saw a bird coming from the north. The wide wingsThey moved two or three times and then remained still, hovering, then flapped their wings again. Lonely, the bird flew directly towards him.

He recognized the bird: a black vulture, messenger from his northern home. The bird squawked loudly, very close to him, and began to circle around him. Sigur raised his left arm and the bird perched on his stump. His head, so dark that his eyes could barely be seen, moved from side to side, as if he didn't see it or wasn't interested in seeing it yet.

-Messenger, how is my family?

The bird flapped its wings, and a pile of feathers fell to the ground. With its curved beak it scratched its chest. Only then did he deign to look at him. Sigur lowered his arm a little, so that the bird could speak in his ear. The beak approached him, and Sigur heard the voices so longed for.

Your child grows as big and strong as is expected of such a seed. Do not be surprised if soon your exploits are forgotten, and his prevail. You will deign to bear the name of Father. Father of the seed that will bear fruit, and these fruits more descendants. And the expected generation will finally arrive. The time when the people of the north will be owners of the land of the dream.

It is not I who speak to you, father, but my future. My future becomes a voice to greet you and show you my face with my voice, since you have never seen me. Therefore, today I mark my future in your memory. Therefore, father, I tell you to be proud of me as you are proud of yourself. The souls arrive, father. The ancient spell that the witches created in the forests will be broken. That's why I came, to tell you not to stop looking at the sky this morning.

Sigur felt a sharp tearing pain in his ear. The bird moved away from him, moved away a little, but stayed attached to his arm. Sigur touched himself with his right hand. Only flaps of flesh remained, his blood flooded her ear and he dripped down her neck. He realized that he could no longer hear from that side. But this didn't seem to worry him. He obeyed, looking up at the sky, and saw the immense flock of black birds approaching from the north. First it was a strip that covered the distant horizon, then it became different lines of increasingly wider and larger flocks.

-Father!

Some ran to him, and when they saw him looking at the valley they began to prepare their weapons, but they saw nothing coming from there.

-Prepare to attack! Form a single flank with the horses, but do not mount.

The men did not understand the purpose. Still half asleep, they readied their weapons.

Tol approached his son.

-What's happening?

-Nothing that didn't have to happen. Look, father, here they come.

Tol looked at the sky. The flocks were innumerable. They arrived in huge groups, one after the other, and the first ones were not too far away.

-We need the tarpans, father. We must have the reinforcements bring their horses too. Messengers! -He called to his right, and ordered them to go in search of the others.

The flocks were almost upon them. The closest ones began to spin. The next ones surrounded them, forming concentric circles as they arrived. In the northern sky no limit to the number of birds could be seen. They

continued to emerge from the distance, increasing, threatening to erase the sunlight with their wide spread wings. The squawks became shrill, and colorless dust fell from the feathers.

Cesius was next to Sigur, and he watched them in ecstasy.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful before," he said. "Listen." They are making a word with their squawks.

He bowed his head slightly and closed his eyes, paying concentrated attention.

-Yeah! They come to help you, they are yours and your son's.

Sigur looked at him, not too surprised by the intuition of this man to whom he had told nothing about his life. The others were finishing rounding up the horses when a wind came down from where the birds were circling. Sigur's red hair stirred, manes moved in the wind, dust and leaves swirled in the air, waking everyone from the morning heaviness.

From the center of the large circle, the black birds began to descend. They continued to squawk, and the men had to cover their ears to avoid being stunned. Then the first bird landed on the back of one of the horses. The tarpan stirred for a moment, then stood still, tamer than if its own rider had ridden it. The rest of the birds did the same one after the other. They perched on each back, in the order in which the rows of animals had been formed. But in the sky, the narrow gap left by those that descended was immediately occupied by the others, so the strange gloom of the morning did not completely disappear. A smell of earth and feathers came with that dust released from the bodies. When they landed on the tarpans, they flapped their wings for a moment, squeezing their backs with their claws, without hurting them.

The men went awayrating from the animals when seeing that. Some, fearful of the wrath of the gods, knelt to pray. Others seemed eager to understand what they were seeing, staring in amazement and fixed on what was happening.

Almost all of the horses were now occupied by the birds, facing the hill that led to the valley. The first of the rows was far from Sigur, but he could see that the bird in the center was changing shape. He remembered the dream of his nights in the north. That was what he had seen, and he believed that he had been dreaming. But now all the birds were transforming into warriors.

The curved beak was being crushed. The plumage became dark hair that reflected the clarity with which the strange morning light hit their figures. The feathers fell to the ground, and the wings folded and coiled until they became thick arms. The legs lengthened, they lost their claws and became legs.

They were no longer birds, but men.

They were warriors.

The pickaxe had become a dagger in their belts. The feathers are made of leather covered with ocher hair and a loincloth secured with bows. The eyes seemed somewhat closed, perhaps confused by the awakening of new forms. They looked from side to side. Their hands firmly in their manes, as if they were afraid of falling. Because maybe they didn't recognize their new body, or maybe they didn't remember the recovered body. Then, a guttural sound came from the throats. What had been his croak was now a moan that slowly turned into a scream.

And an arm rose from the front row. The birdman had finished transforming him, and he was shouting with his arm raised:

-Attack!

He was joined by the voices of the others, a mixture of screeching and singing, with their arms raised, still spreading feathers that fluttered around, their daggers cutting the wind that the rest of the birds were still causing as they continued descending in the last rows. Then they galloped off, the others following them at a short distance.

Tol's men retreated, weapons in hands, still pointing at what they saw. Maybe they thought that all that prodigy would come upon them to punish them. Some ran back into the forest.

-Get ready!-Tol shouted.-We must follow them. That's why we have come.

But they did not allow themselves to be convinced. That was not what they had expected to find. Forces they did not understand, powers whose favor could easily turn contrary. Without knowing where these beings came from or to whom they responded, the best thing was to fear them and flee.

"Cowards!" said Tol.

Sigur's men did not move from their places, but they trembled. It was seen in the movement of the eyes that they followed the steps of the bird-men. Sigur heard the earth thunder with the horses' hooves. The screeching of the birds in the sky had increased, because there were no free tarpans left. Their noises were no longer squawks, but helpless voices, and some birds came down and attacked the men who were watching.

"Be patient!" Sigur shouted, but not to them, but to the birds. "More horses are approaching."

A herd was arriving from the forest, surrounded by ash billowing in the air. The manes danced and the riders spurred the horses. Each man rode one and held the reins of another ten. There were three hundred beasts,

perhaps five hundred tarpans ready to march. Behind, Aristid reappeared in command of a group of two hundred men.

-I brought all the reinforcements that were left from the resistance! I'm proud of them, they were determined to save the horses from the fire.

"Good!" said Sigur, and began to guide the tarpans towards the free places left by those who had advanced.

Aristid was panting after the ride, and had sat down to drink. The water stuck in his throat when he saw the birds that covered the entire sky beyond the forest from which he had just emerged, and turned into men on the backs of horses. His legs trembled and the vertigo almost made him fall. He hadn't eaten or drunk enough in four days.

"Gods," he murmured. -What curse is this?

Sigur wasted no time explaining.

-Prepare your men, at any moment they will have to advance.

-But….-Aristid kept pointing at the birdmen. -Are they going to fight?

-The first battle, but maybe we should continue. We don't know how long the enemies will resist.

Aristid did not ask again. He threw the pot and ran to alert his people. Sigur watched with jealous eyes the metamorphosis of each bird.

-Father, stay here until you see the warriors from the lake retreat! Then move on!

Without waiting for a response, he trotted out and stood in front of the sky warriors, who continued to gather behind the last rows. Tol watched the front of the columns disappear, sinking behind the side of the hill.

YesIgur found the lake warriors resisting the advance of the birdmen, penetrating the chests of the tarpans with spears. But his men responded with blows from the edge of a dagger, cutting off heads and arms that fell into the mud. He kept wondering why the enemies had not advanced during the night. They would have easily defeated them in the dark.

Maybe they are afraid of the dark. If they come from the region without light, if they wander lost in the continuous fog of a sky without gods. The heaven of the earth to which they tie themselves with an eternal desire to return. Be men again. Will they miss the light so much, perhaps, that they can no longer stand the darkness?

The birdmen pushed their way through the compact groups of dead warriors. However, after perhaps half a day, perhaps more, they again

advanced against everything in their path. The horses attempted to retreat, forcing them to continue the battle. The bones of the dead broke and peeked out of the flesh, but the broken arms continued to fight, and the broken legs continued to walk.

The horsemen of the sky were in danger so close to the ax of the dead. The birdmen continued cutting off heads as they passed. Sigur advanced with reinforcements to relieve the wounded, but the souls made flesh of the birdmen, finally free from the spell of the witches, did not want to rest. Then they got up and looked for the healthy horses, and returned to the front.

The men who advanced on foot killed with spears and daggers from one side to the other.

The open skulls were bones like snail shells turned upside down. Skulls open like fruits with spilled pulp, falling, hanging from necks, swinging on backs.

"An endless battle," said Cesius, who had accompanied Sigur despite his refusal.

-They will determine the ending. I am only an instrument, my body is nothing compared to the time they have waited for. I think I understood it too late.

He continued to watch the roar of the battle, the clash of weapons and bodies. Dirty with mud, covered in feces and fragments of flesh and splinters of the bones of the dead. The smell of blood and the aroma of rot. But also the other aroma, that of feathers and the perfume of the northern air. For a moment, which he immediately lost again in his memory, he once again felt Gerda's scent, that of her light hair covered in snowflakes.

He looked at the birdmen, and saw her.

He looked at the birdmen, and saw his own.

He searched the sky for his son, and found her in every pair of eyes of every bird.

Then he gave a warning cry, making his warriors advance again. Commanding the army that he had formed over so much distance traveled, and that perhaps could not be repeated in thousands of winters.

-Attack!

His voice was repeated by the rows and columns that were fighting, disordered and tired, but they obeyed without stopping.

-Attack!

The men advanced. The dead warriors retreated. The fallen were crushed by the horses, and although they could get back up, they no longer

had a reason to do so. Every body was capable of recovering, that was the task of water, but dead flesh was an insurmountable obstacle. That is why the bodies sank into the mud, disfiguring the shapes in the same slow way in which they had been born from the water.

"The lake!" said Cesius.

Sigur looked up. They were now very close, and the enemies were retreating towards them. A huge mass of mud was overflowing from the banks, but he couldn't see the cause. He looked for his brother, but without finding her. He would have wanted to say goodbye to him.

And he didn't know why he had thought of that.

His horse reared. There were too many bodies crushed on the ground. They advanced on flesh and bones stuck in the mud and the beasts trotted, staggering and hurting themselves with the splinters. When they reached the beach, they saw that the lake had shrunk its edges. The entire area they were passing through had been covered by water, now strewn with bodies so old that they seemed to have been buried hundreds of winters before.

The lake was drying up.

Then they heard the cries.

At first they couldn't tell where they were coming from. They were breathy moans, but they never stopped completely. Different tones succeeding each other, and there were so many that they couldn't come from a single person. Many were crying somewhere, and they were not the wounded men, because the cries were weak and sharp. They came from somewhere from the center of the lake.

Cesius sat up straight in the saddle, trying to see and pay attention to the sound.

"What is it?" Sigur asked.

Cesius pointed to the lake.

-Children!

Sigur waited for him to explain.

-The children abandoned in the boat adrift. They are crying!

-But they are too manygone far to listen to them.

-They are dead, don't you see them?

And Sigur followed with his eyes the point that Cesius was pointing out. In the center of the lake, an opaque spot struggled to emerge from the mist.

Cesius looked ecstatic at that discovery.

-If you knew how much the women of the town cried. Every morning for several winters they went to the shore and waited. The waters became corrupted night after night, and the smell enveloped them like a message that they refused to hear. The boat of dead children! There it is, emerging from the shadows!

The cries grew louder, and began to hurt Sigur's ears like thorns. A chill ran down his spine. He tried to concentrate on the advance of his men, who continued to defeat the lake warriors. The waters were drying quickly, and were leading them towards the center. He soon saw the boat more clearly. It was a tall hull without sails. It did not move or sway, only maintaining a slight inclination. It was, perhaps, stranded. He could not see anyone inside, but the fog, gradually clearing, moved around in different directions, as if weak winds exhaled from small breasts were pushing it.

The cries continued a little louder, and Sigur could distinguish up to six or seven voices, only a few more identifiable. Impossible to know how many there were in reality. Each one seemed to unfold in turn, multiply into countless tones.

Sigur thought of his son.

The squawking of the birds in the sky had faded, but it served as a background to blend in with the cries of the children.

The birds and children cried.

Sigur kept thinking about his son. The mere idea, fleeting, that he could be suffering, was similar to the sensation of that old ax cutting off his left hand.

-Attack! "Attack!" He shouted without thinking.

The warriors and their beasts who were waiting at the top of the hill advanced. The roar of hooves echoed across the entire hill, the mass of horses and riders raising the dust like a cloud of crumbling dirt from the sky. But Sigur only then realized that he and Cesius were in the middle of the road, without any sign distinguishing them in the mist.

-Protect yourself! -He shouted at Cesius.

Then they separated.

He saw Sigur disappear among the confused rest of animals and men. The dust had enveloped him, but his red hair could be distinguished from time to time. Then, the last rows that joined the first ones began to run over each other. Perhaps the soil on the hillside had loosened after so many battles. Perhaps the night dew and rain had removed the roots that formed the skeleton of the earth.

What Cesius saw was an avalanche of earth, men and horses slipping and falling down the hill, growing as they joined the men who were halfway up the inclined path. But the front continued unchanged, always advancing and ignorant of what was happening.

Cesius rode until he got as close as he could to the avalanche that had already stopped. The dust raised was a mass that only allowed him to hear the screams of men. He decided to dismount and continue on foot. The wounded tried to get up from under the enormous balls of mud that covered the corpses. Only hands and legs were visible protruding from the surface. Many called from under the dead horses. The tips of the tarpans' ribs looked like cages stuck in the mud. The screams for help stunned him, but he was willing to ignore them to search for Sigur.

The few men who were able to get up had broken arms, and in the exposed bones there were feathers that still continued to cover the wounds. They moved their heads like wounded birds usually do, and waved their arms to shake themselves like useless injured wings.

Then he saw, not far away, a group of men standing. He ran towards them, jumping over the corpses and sometimes slipping, until he made his way through those who were gathered there. Sigur's body lay under the weight of several dead bodies that the others had not yet finished removing, while others shoveled the dirt from the sides and broke the bones with their hoes.

When they finally released him, he approached to verify what he already knew. The corpse was covered in mud, with part of the skull torn off and a lot of dirt covering the open half of the head, the legs broken and bent like stems, in a humiliating and dishonorable posture. It was not death for a man like Sigur, Cesius told himself. If everything he had heard was true, this was not the death he deserved. Among so many men who were there, there were three who had arrived with Sigur from the Northern region. He knew it because he saw them kneel next to the body and begin to clean it, while they prayed out loud and without looking at anyone. ie more.

-Thierhold-they repeated-Thierhold…

They straightened Sigur's legs, washed his face and long red hair, until he gave him an appearance that could piously be called dignified in the midst of the disaster that surrounded them.

death in the mud

Death in fire.

The rest is always dust and ashes, dust and smoke.

He approached the body as the others moved away, and crouched down, muttering something the others did not understand.

-How will I tell your father? -He continued asking him, wondering.

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When he saw his men retreating, Tol loudly gave the order to advance. His people and his son's people then rode at a trot, away from the gray forest floor towards the dirt meadow disturbed by so many hooves and footsteps. The grass had been completely uprooted, the horses were jumping over the roots of the bushes that formed a tangle of mud and stones.

Sigur's people seemed to be triumphing, and a blind confidence, which he had not previously dared to yield to, began to form in his mind. That's why the next sensation was so unexpected, as if his hand had been cut off with an invisible weapon, with no pain yet, but it would come later, no doubt. But now it was just that, the sensation of the earth shaking coming from beyond the middle of the slope. A rain of mud that rose, and then fell, raising the little dust that was already dry. The dust on the backs of the tarpans. The dust on the faces of dying men.

He could see, from afar, how the animals were slipping and crushing each other. Tol looked at Aristid from a distance. He saw him make an affirmative gesture, and they continued forward.

He again felt that strange restlessness that seemed more and more like a bad omen. The sound of many cries caught his attention. Not of men, but of children.

What can children be doing in this battle.

Without stopping, Tol pointed to his right ear with his raised hand, looking at Aristid. He nodded his head, raising his shoulders in ignorance. There were some clear spots in the sky, the birds were decreasing in number and a timid sun peeked out, forming large, fleeting circles over the field. A dull glow highlighted the masses of men as they crossed the hill, until another large flock covered the sun again.

The cries resurfaced, turned into the screams of children who can no longer stand the pain, or the sadness, or perhaps the loneliness of their state. Then Tol saw that the lake had shrunk to a space no larger than forty men could occupy, and was almost dry.

In the center, a tilted boat was moving.

Not enough water to navigate, and yet it was moving.

The wood of the hull and deck gave way and fell into the mud, the only thing that remained of the vast waters. While the wood fell, breaking off not

as if something made it explode from within, but because of its own rot, a group of strange figures appeared from within.

Tol had his men stop before reaching what was now a dry beach in front of the lake ruins. Aristid also stopped walking, and everyone was higher than the level of the beach, so they saw what was left of the lake, nothing but mud drying so quickly that you could see the water vapor rising from the ground and leaving dry, hard mounds. , from which bone spicules or entire bones protruded like broken columns.

And always in the midst of a growing aridity, there was the broken boat, illuminating like a female strange figures whose shapes were still unrecognizable.

Then the black birds opened a huge blue hole in the sky, and countless white birds emerged from the boat, with plumage so clear and brilliant that it blinded the eyes of the men who were watching.

The white birds, larger than the messengers of the North, spread their wings as wide as the entire length of the boat, and rose towards that opening in the sky. One by one, they flew until they were lost to sight in the heights, their pale outlines blending with the blurred blue of the horizon.

Tol felt lost in a world he didn't know. What were his mortal aspirations, but sad and small conflicts in the face of that battle that went beyond the size of his spirit.

If he hadn't abandoned them that day. If he hadn't taken me away from Sulla and my children. Not even my father's sacrifice would be among the wounds of my soul. Nor the great distance that separates me from Sigur's love.

And Zaid's spirit would not have become what it is. I could have been his protector. I could have hugged him and made that be enough to transform him into another man.

Tol was unable to get rid of that anguish, the origin of which he could not touch or see with his hands. Something that did not come from the deep past, but from what had not yet happened. A blade opening his chest on himexact center of the ribs.

His heart was beating with unusual rapidity, and not even during the battle had he felt it shake like that. He handed over command to Aristid and headed towards the remains of the lake. A group of five or more men were approaching him. He noticed the fatigue, the swing of the tarpans' injured legs sliding on the slope of the ground. He recognized Cesius's horse, and although he was relieved to find it again, he did not stop worrying. When they were close, Cesius stepped forward.

Tol guessed his face under the sad mask of dirt and blood. But above all, he realized what those fine lines were, white and clean, furrows that ran up and down the cheeks of the other men. Then two of them made their way through the others, and behind them appeared a horse carrying a body. Face down, the legs dangled on one side and the arms on the other. His hair swayed with the movement of the tarpan over the mounds of the battlefield. Some long hair covered the dead man's face. Red hair.

Sigur dead.

The only one who was going to inherit the land, dead.

Tol shouted without getting off his horse. A scream that could have torn the muscles in his throat, sounding deep and long, prolonged in the echo of the mountains.

The men saw him clench his trembling fists, digging his nails into the mane and pulling on them so hard that the tarpan began to move and neigh. They came to him, but he paid them no attention.

When his scream finally stopped, he still had his eyes closed and his eyebrows furrowed, but he wasn't crying. His graying hair, his almost white boat, shook more with the trembling of his body than with the breeze, yet he remained stiller than the earth at his feet. Then he opened his eyelids, and without looking at anyone he dismounted and walked towards Sigur. He leaned his body against that of his son, hiding his face on the dead man's back. He remained like that for a long time, and suddenly, like a sudden awakening, he grabbed a lock of Sigur's hair in his fist, and cut it off with his dagger. Then he tied them together and wrapped the leather loop that held the ax against the side of his chest. The others watched him as if they were witnessing a ritual, silent and absorbed in his sadness.

Tol then sighed deeply with a groan, and began to speak to the two men closest to Sigur. His eyes seemed barely able to contain the fury.

-Listen. I know that you came with him from the land of the North. Prepare the body properly, and bring it back so that my grandson can honor his memory. I will not bury him in these cursed lands.

He directed his gaze toward the valley. Aristid was approaching the bare surface where the lake had been. Many men supported him, walking slowly over the bones and mud. The townspeople were also going there, but from what had been the opposite bank and where the last long and disastrous winters had been settled. There where Reynod had taken them, when they were still docile and believed in him. Carrying hoes and axes, those distant, narrow silhouettes walked with their heads down, but firm. Not slowly, but with a confidence they had never shown before, at least not that Tol could remember when he lived with them.

They were alone for the first time.

For the first time they were without a man to guide them. However, they walked not with empty hands, but with tools and work instruments. They were going to do something, something occupied their minds.

Tol watched them stop and begin to remove the earth, still muddy in the center, hard all around. Men and women penetrated the earth with their hoes, breaking the almost stony clods, killing the worms in the mud.

They broke the remains of the bones into splinters.

And Aristide, on one side of the large group of people, watched them work. He didn't encourage them to do it, he just watched them. And the townspeople gave him a look from time to time. The teeth sometimes shone on the women's faces, and the men, only with the continuous and uninterrupted movement of the muscles, showed their gentle acceptance.

Tol returned his thoughts to Sigur's body.

They were taking his son to the coast and towards the boats.

Only Cesius remained at his side.

"Finally I must believe in the gods..." Tol murmured.

Cesius waited for him to continue speaking.

-Why shouldn't my entire family die at my hands? Why some and not all?

He paused again, always looking at the town he had left more than twenty winters before.

-These thoughts have been flying in the air of doom since long before I was born. Thoughts so cruel, ideas perpetrated with such perfection, that they could only have been born from the minds of the gods.

Without looking at Cesius, he remounted. He stood still for ainstant. He took the ax out of its sheath, and got rid of the already broken spear and the dagger. They both sank into the mud, like the useless remains of a warrior.

He rode, without a precise objective, knowing only that he must go to the eastern end of the valley, where the main number of the enemy remained still awaiting the advance of the rebels. The huts were smoking. Many children cried alone, kneeling and hugging each other.

Tol advanced among the women who approached him crying. They grabbed onto the horse's mane and tail, allowing themselves to be dragged along while begging for their lives to be spared. He whipped them with the lasso until they let go. Others fled when they saw him, amazed to see him arrive alone, with him being the great victor.

The older ones looked at him, pointing at him. He could even guess what they were saying despite not being able to hear them over the screams. Nothing but old people, children and women remained. The rest had gone to dig in the dry lake.

At the end of the town, a group of men with weapons were waiting for him. They were the last surviving warriors of Zaid's guard. They formed a wall as he saw him advance, and he stopped his horse.

-Son!

The men murmured. Behind them, someone pushed them to make way. Zaid appeared between them and walked towards his father. He seemed to have been crying.

He didn't say a word. He knew it wasn't necessary.

When he saw Tol turn around again, he followed him.

The men who saw him leave lost their last pride when they saw their leader walking away crestfallen behind an old man with harsh gestures. Then they went in search of what was left of their families.

Tol did not dare to look back. He heard Zaid's footsteps on the dust, almost dragging, and he could imagine his haggard figure contracted by shame.

Grief overcame him at times, but that same grief was at the same time so deep that it mobilized his insides and gave rise to the fury that had dragged him there. Because he was no longer sure that he had gone by his will, but that a fist made of pain, as big as the hand of the gods, had taken him by the shoulders to take him towards his son.

It's not revenge, I'm sure. It's something I can't name. Which prevents me from seeing his face without feeling pain.

Replace the hug of him with the edge of a weapon. If a hug could have made him be another man, now this will do it too.

It's not revenge. Damn my soul, more than it already is, if it were so.

Because I'm his father, I have to do it. Save him from himself.

That is. I must convince myself, even though it hurts more than the pain of all the men born in the world to date.

Gods who play with souls!

I hate you!

I hate the world!

When they were back on the dry lake, far from the rest of the men, Tol stopped. He turned the horse, and met Zaid's eyes.

It had been twenty winters since he had looked into those eyes. He didn't even look like the boy he had left on the raft. If he had not responded to his name, he would never have been able to recognize him. He dismissed that thought. Seeing him as a stranger did not help his task, quite the contrary. He made him feel that the man was oblivious to the pain that demanded compensation.

Strange word. I don't know why I think about her.

I no longer know if one death compensates for another. Maybe one leads to another, and another, always. We can't stop.

He saw Zaid's dark hair sway on either side of a part down the middle of his skull. His son had hidden his eyes from him when he was caught looking at his father's back as they walked.

He does not dare to look at me directly, and he watches suspiciously, like someone contemplating disasters in the darkness of his hiding place.

His mind is dark. I have seen it in his eyes, just for an instant. But they are not his mother's eyes, as Sigur's were.

Now I know: they are mine.

He felt a strange relief. What had to be done, the logic of his thinking confirmed.

He took a deep breath. He was on the verge of losing his strength due to the crying that was fighting to emerge. Then he uttered a cry similar to the one he had dedicated to his other son, but more worn, with a tone of broken trunks, of stormy wind felling trees in an ancient forest. He spurred the tarpan on, and rode at a fast trot with his right arm raised and the left held in his mane.

In his raised hand he carried the axe.

He wanted not to see. But it was inevitable.

Zaid's face lifted just as I was on top of him. He saw her eyes full of fear, his son's arms raised to cover herself. And Tol no longer had the strength to end everything in one fell swoop. The ax wounded him without killing him. The weapon had entered Zaid's shoulder, and remained stuck there, while his arm dangled from a thick mass of muscle.

His son screamed, but biting his lips at the same time, as if he wanted to contain himself. . He seemed ashamed of appearing weak in front of his father.

Tol got off the horse and knelt next to him.

-I didn't want this! I didn't want it this way! -She said stammering.- You must believe me! One sharp blow, my son, and you would have felt no more pain than the sting of a quail. But suddenly I faltered. My damn hand betrayed me.

He looked at his right palm, then closed it tightly to hurt it with his nails. Then he tore the ax from the body of his son, and a gush of blood gushed forth abundantly and uncontrollably from the side of his chest under his shoulder.

Zaid was breathing hard, with a hiss that seemed to come not from his mouth, but from his wound, and then he squeezed his father's hand with his.

"Father," he managed to murmur.

Tol put his ear to Zaid's lips.

The smell of his son.

The same scent he had as a child. The same aroma. The same aroma. The same aroma…the same aroma…the same…aroma…the same

He closed his eyes, so as not to cry, and listened.

-I told them not to move forward tonight... -And his lips trailed off as he closed his eyes.

However, the blood continued to flow for a few moments, until it stopped. Until it becomes a new thick, red and dark lagoon. But small, the size of his body.

Tol, with his knees sunk in blood, tried to get up, repeating between his teeth those last words he had heard, as if he wanted to understand them. But from repeating them so much they began to lose meaning. With the edge of the axe, he cut off a lock of Zaid's hair, and placed it next to Sigur's, against his chest.

He again felt his body open with an imaginary wound in the center of his ribs.

But he heard the thunder of a horse's hooves passing by him, and someone lifted him by the shoulders. He suddenly found himself on the red tarpan of Cesius, who had him with him. Tol clasped his hands around Cesius's waist, watching the landscape pass by: the mountains, the people digging, the smoke from the town and the last birds returning to the North.

He closed his eyes, and thought. He would have stayed like that, if he hadn't felt a burning sensation in his hands. He let go to look at them, without understanding what the other was telling him, perhaps warning him not to let go. But his hands were burning so intensely that perhaps he was hurt and hadn't realized it.

Then, resting the back of his hands on Cesius's back, he opened them, and could no longer contain the pain in his chest.

In the palms he saw, newly formed, large and heavy, two beating hearts.

Tol fell from his horse, hitting his back against some rocks on the ground. When he recovered, he lay face up in the dust. But he no longer had anything in his hands. He couldn't move. He barely managed to turn his head a little to the side, he saw that Cesius had stopped to look back, but perhaps believing him dead, he continued riding. Tol stood still, watching him walk away. There was nothing left for him to do more than that.

The hair of his children, mixed with the white hair of his chest, caressed him. The sun fell fully on the earth, also warming his face with warm breaths. The red tarpan continued to move away, more beautiful than ever before. Perhaps the only truly beautiful thing he remembered seeing in his entire life, fading into the distance, until it was nothing more than a small dot.

And then, not even that, in the splendid aridity of the land.